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Rethinking postmodernism: *The vices of the postmodern world* by Gheorghe Crăciun

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This paper aims at investigating the way in which the contemporary author Gheorghe Crăciun sees and analyzes a series of what he calls vicious concepts. The Vices of the Postmodern World, his book which comprises a set of articles he published in Observator Cultural Magazine, looks into ideas such as consumerism, diversity, uniqueness or imitation but in the larger context of postmodernism, mainly Romanian postmodernism. At the same time, he calls into question the way in which every one of these vicious concepts establishes itself and functions at the level of the imagery, again in the context of the Romanian society and its frame of mind. The aim is to write a book without references, born out of real living and out of the author's own schizoid view of the culture, as he himself declares. Each of the eleven short but at the same time very intense articles brings forward one essential aspect of the postmodern culture and society and so an analysis of these pieces can reveal not only the main cultural obsessions of the author's later years but it can also add to Crăciun's older writing in order to get a glimpse of what stays the same and what changes in the writer's view on postmodernism.

Key-words: *postmodernism, vicious concepts, consumer society, variety, speed, product*

The Vices of the Postmodern World is one of the last published expressions of Gheorghe Crăciun's thinking. A posthumous book, *The Vices of the Postmodern World* gathers a series of 11 articles which the author, who passed away in January 2007, wrote for the Observator Cultural Magazine between 12th of October 2006 and 21st of December 2006. It was not the first time he tried to conquer illness through writing: this also happened in 2002-2003, when Gheorghe Crăciun signed another series of articles in *Observator Cultural Magazine* as a result of a friend's request: Ion Bogdan Lefter knew very well that his friend would respond to the challenge of writing about contemporary literature and that this would accelerate his recovery. This is exactly what happened, writing proved itself able to beat the physical suffering of the author, who had just avoided death due to liver failure. The first series of articles were collected in a book, which also appeared posthumous, *The Somatographic Pact* (2009) with a foreword signed by Ion Bogdan Lefter in which the full story of the book is minutely described.

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The Somatographic Pact and *The Vices of the Postmodern World* seem to leave an almost identical history, in terms of motivation and healing powers, both assigned to writing. Here is more visible than anywhere else that for a writer the act of writing actually nominates the mere reasons for living. This time, the illustration of the idea is as clear and as literal as it gets. For this reason, both books need to be considered in simultaneity with their extraliterary history in order to be fully understood in their uttermost consequences available. If it had not been for the biographic accidents represented by illness, both books would have probably remained nothing more but a small part of Craciun's archive, a deeper subject than can be covered in the present paper.

However, even if they share almost the same background pattern and way of comming into being, the two boks are independent both in term of intention and composition and in terms of subject. *The Somatographic Pact* deals with a series of contemporary Romanian auhors and what makes their writing unique while *The Vices of the Postmodern World* tackles upon what the author calls *vicious concepts* of the postmodern Romanian culture. This volume distances itself from all the others signed by the writer in ways which will be minutely analysed at a later point in this paper. Moreover, this paper aims to investigate some of the paradigmatic images of Romanian postmodernism in Gherorghe Crăciun's view and to recompose the image of postmodernism as it appears in this book, the anaylisis being characterised both by a theoretical, descriptive level, and an exemplifying one.

In order to get a full picture of why this book looks the way it looks and says what it says, there is an acute need to put it into the perspective of its coming into being. In other words, the need to tell its story from the moment when its essential ideea appeared. As stated before, Gheorghe Crăciun was in the process of writing these series of articles concerning the vicious concepts of postmodernism when he died. A very solid proof for this is the fact that the last text, *The Solitude of the Mobile Phone User*, was left unfinished. *The Vices of the Postmodern World* not only comprises the full series of articles but also a part of the writer's diary, the one concerning this book. In this way, by reading them as a whole, one can thoroughly understand both the context and even get a glimpse at the full extension of the writer's thinking.

The way in which the book came into being is perhaps more relevant than in the case of his other works. Generally speaking, notations about the creations are not scarce in the context of Crăciun's writing. There is the famous example of *The Body Knows Better* (2006) as a creative double for *Pupa Russa* novel and this is not the only place where the writer makes refference at the way in which he came into an idea or another in terms of the creative process. This is why one informed reader can legitimally ask the question whether there is a so called illuminated starting point in the case of each and every book of Gheorghe Crăciun. Is there an identifiable real

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life experience which constitutes itself as a moment out of time and, at the same time, as meaningful starting point for a creative work? Even if it is somewhat beside the purpose of this papaer and it constitutes into a whole different discussion, such an approach can prove itself useful for the understanding of the creative process at Gheorghe Crăciun. Moreover, he author himself declares, both in his diary and in the first article, how he came up with the idea of the book. An interesting fact to be noted here is that he conceived it from the very beginning as a book, not only as a mere series of articles in a cultural magazine.

This is what he says about the origin of *The Vices of the Postmodern World* in a note dated 16th of July 2006:

> I found myself on a metro platform in the morning, just coming back from the train station, whenI stroke upon the idea of a book that could maybe be called *The Vices of the Modern World* (I know there is a poetry book by the South American poet Nicanor Parra which is entitled *The Vices of the Modern World* but mine will not be a series of samples but a phenomenology of values). Actually, I came up with the idea while watching a commercial billboard stating that you can find at Media Galaxy store a great variety of cameras. The word *variety* surprised me and I started to think of it. It is one of the key-words of today's world. And today's world is a world of products. A serialised world. And so on. The book I am thinking about would be a sort of an index of vicious concepts of the postmodern world or, better said, of concepts viciated by the mere way in which this world runs. (Crăciun 2011: 90)

This quotation from the diary is almost identical to the opening of the first article (*On a Metro Platform*) but here Crăciun adds that his intention is to play upon subjectivity in such a way that the book does not become either too personal or too boring. It is as if he sees the word *variety* for the first time and it strikes a chord in his intellect so hard that it constitutes into the starting point of a book. So, literally, the book is made of words, based on words, born out of words. Of words of the type *food for thought*, fertile words which act as a catalyst and bring about a whole conceptual frame of mind. In this case, the word *variety* conjugates itself in the broader conceptual umbrella represented by the postmodernism. And from this on, the reader can sit back and enjoy a complex train of thought that basically questions Romanian postmodernism in its most detailed and at the same relevant aspects.

The need to write this book is immediate, almost urgent, the author says that he would have wanted to start the book in the very exact spot he found himself, on the metro platform. The index of the book establishes itself, apparently with no help from the author:

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> I was thinking that I should not only write about variety, but also bout difference and uniqueness. I just could not miss the chance of a sign-analysis of presence, a possible discourse of the show outside performing arts. Then there would follow, in turns, repetition, multiplicity, virtuality, otherness, instant communication, the touching, the fanatsy, the surrogate, the body, the absence, voyeurism, dissemination, indeterminacy, interface[...]. But also snobism, trendiness, cosmopolitism, clubbing, elitism, the bigotry of imitation, the obscenity of namelessness. (Crăciun 2011: 18)

The task ahead is not only complex but also extremly audacious because what Gheorghe Crăciun wants to do is to actually write a thematic dictionary of postmodernism as it presents itself in his view and in the context of the post-communist Romanian society.

There has to be emphasized that these texts, even though conceived from the very beginning as parts of a book, appeared in a serialized form and any of the statements from the first text could not be edited in the way writers are regularly able to in case of books. The project presents itself as being too complex, there is no doubt about it, however the reader is left to ask himself how the finished task would have looked like. Still, this constant oscillation article versus book is yet another reminder of things left unfinished but not out of the writer's will but due to tragic death.

In a way it is a true trademark of Crăciun's writing to insist so much upon the pre-existing work of creation of a title. So is his development regarding the way in which he sees suited to make his point, stating that he does not want to conceptualize because this would be a sure path towards a dry, frozen book. What he aims at is:

> a lively book, in which to show that each of these concepts are responsible for crisis, that they absorb in their content human tensions, they leave the flesh without blood and they cause chronic addictions. A lively book, reference free, born out of my own schizoid view upon culture. (Crăciun 2011: 18)

The extent to which Gheorghe Crăciun succeeds to live up to his own expectation is yet to be determined by the analysis that follows. Moreover, a further goal is to be added, that of questioning the way in which Crăciun's view on postmodernism changes in his later years, as opposed to the concept of postmodernism as he stated in his early years. There are significant shifts here as well and it is in fact appropriate to see *The Vices* as a form of cultural will, as it is his last point of view on the matter, expressed so close to the moment of his sudden passing.

Carmen Muşat, in the foreword she signs, likens Gheorghe Crăciun to Camil Petrescu from the point of view of the ample scope of the theoretical vision and the capacity to impose both a system and innovations in this field. They are both alike in what regards the fanatism of writing and the closeness to philosophy (Camil

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Petrescu, the phenomenology of Husserl and Gheorghe Crăciun - the phenomenology of the body, from the Merleau Ponty's perspective of *incorporated thought*). What she does not say is that they are fundamentally different from at least one point of view: while Camil Petrescu is free to take the luxury of stating something in his theoretical works and something different in his literary one, Crăciun is defined by the close translation of his theoretical principles into his literary writing, in this way offering his novels not only flesh and consistency, but also an ideatic background which is in perfect coordination with his non-fictional train of thought. While staying true to himself both in the theoretical works and in his literary ones, Crăciun creates a unity of the world he creates with words, an internal coherence that proves itself productive for any researcher of his work. It would be very interesting to see how his later novels, *Pupa russa* for example, translates in fiction the principles he asserts in *The Vices of the Postmodern World* in terms of images and understanding of postmodern realities.

Overlapping the diary pages and the articles that resulted from three considerations (initially written purely for personal use), one cannot help but notice how the texts that appeared in *Observator Cultural* are nothing but user-friendly interfaces of these ideas. The process they underwent condensed them in such a way that no word can be omitted without actually losing the intended meaning. This is why an informed reading should cover both the articles and the diary pages. Coming back to the general style of the articles and the author's predilection for condensed, short sentences, it must be said that this actually is not a very usual characteristic of his writing, not even of the one also published in literary magazines. It is less likely that this has to do with the specific limitations of article but more with the belief that this sometimes cryptic fashion of expression is the best way to make his point. The sentences are almost Twitter-like in terms of length and this proves at times to be a real challenge for the reader because not even one word can be skipped without the risk of missing the point: "Brand personalization. Uniform and person. Levelling and personalization" (Crăciun 2011: 95). Moreover, sometimes a paragraph has to be read more than once. In this way, *The Vices of the Postmodern World* proves itself to be not the easy read that the reduced number of pages seemed to promise. This is of course a stylistic point of view because the discussion appears to complicate if we approach the ideatic content, which will be done later on this paper.

Coming back to the style of *The Vices*, there can also be noticed that the writer of *Pupa russa* fails to efface himself because there are quite a few paragraphs which seem to overcrowd the terms of enumerative lists, like in this fragment:

> Jeans which are cut, perforate, pre-washed, torn according to a pattern straight from the factory. Cardigans which are plucked, disheveled, with threads and burls usually hidden sticking out just like in a pattern. Skirts which are fringed, torn to tatters, which seem to be made out of randomly torn pieces which have never seen a pair of scissors. Summer jackets which are bought

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> pre-washed already. New shoes with vintage leather, worn down even before you put them on. T-shirts which are randomly stained, still smelling as recent mass-production, tops which are already wrinkled that you might try to iron without any success, rusty jewelry, blackened by passing of a time without time, rings with artistically crackled stones, cotton jerseys like fish nets, loosely hanging on the body. Cloth bags made out of napping rags, rag-like swimwear, and leather jackets apparently shriveled at sleeves and shoulders etc, etc. (Crăciun 2011: 31)

At a first glance, there is a strong contradiction between the predilection for condensed sentences and these ample enumerations but this is just a rushed reading. In fact, these two characteristics blend together very well and wonderfully serve the purpose of getting the points across. The concentrated sentences usually state an idea and the demonstration grows exactly by means of stringing these types of sentences. Moreover, there is another aspect that comes into play: by using this stylistic characteristic, Gheorghe Crăciun preserves the distinguishing urge to write down observations regarding the surrounding reality and facts. It is as if the distance between writing and reading is actually shortened to a minimum and the reader gets the impression that what he/she has just read is only moments away from actually happening. However, the overlapping of the articles and the diary fragment clearly shows that this is a choice of the author, a very subtle but yet even more efficient one.

On the other hand, ample examples come in handy at the end of such theoretical (and sometimes cryptic) argumentations. What seems to lack (in terms of properly conveying the message) is provided in the lists of examples, as seen in the quotation above. As mentioned before, this is a feature that transgresses the author's writing from the fictional side and the very interesting aspect to note here is that his previous theoretical/critical text works lack this particular way of enforcing the discourse. In the case of *The Vices of the Postmodern World* it is yet another stylistically informed choice because in this way the text earns a much needed balance. Throughout examples which crowd themselves in page-long paragraphs, the ideas stated as scarce as possible seen to gain weight.

Moreover, this also relates to the origin of the texts as reflections of experience. The piling up of images both the source and the meaning to illustrate an idea in such a way that there could hardly be any ways left to contradict it. Very briefly analyzing the quotation above, one can notice how these images accumulate and eventually they almost harass the observant viewer that Crăciun is and this is yet another classic case of *who was first in here*, here in the form of *Which was first, the image or the idea?* One can never tell for sure and this perpetual oscillation is one of the strong point of the book.

As suggested previously, there is a very interesting pattern here in what concerns the flow between real-life experience – idea and back to examples

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extracted from the surrounding reality. Not even one idea is formulated without leaving a solid background to support it and this is why the author's self-imposed condition (in the first text) is entirely accomplished. Based on the fact that conceptualization is the easiest way to kill, dry, freeze everything it touches. Gheorghe Crăciun states that: "What I wanted was an animated book (…) without references, fresh out of my own schizoid view on culture." (Crăciun 2011: 18)

This *schizoid view on culture* obviously refers to the dichotomy modernism-postmodernism that constitutes the foundation of the book. Postmodernism is viewed, presented and analyzed in a constant opposition to modernism and the definition of postmodernism (which has to be assembled through the texts) deeply reflects this. There is one advantage here, that of things always being put into the historical perspective but other than that, the message that Crăciun sends is that of a postmodernist skeptic. This is why the analysis is sometimes cold however objective after all and maybe slightly biased due to the fact that the author himself recognizes his utter lack of adhesion to his cultural and social phenomenon. As it will be shown later in the analysis of the imaginary and meaning of postmodernism with Gheorghe Crăciun, this lack of adherence to the idea of postmodernism makes him depict it in bleak terms, as a crisis in the first place (on the language, of divinity, of the person and so on). However, he does not denounce it completely but he is balanced towards it, stating that it is actually a change that can prove itself useful. This can be illustrated by the itinerary the writer chooses for the book: he starts by describing postmodernism in its defining concepts (in the first three of four texts) but, towards the end of the book, even if he does not become enthusiastic supporter, the texts become somewhat more optimistic (*He who loses wins* is perhaps the most positive text in the whole series and the one offering a constructive perspective).

In his review for the book, Daniel Cristea Enache likens Gheorghe Crăciun to Horia Roman Patapievici from the point of view of the critique made by both postmodernists, while Alex Goldiş sees him as a constructor of the concept rather than an opponent, as Alexandru Muşina is, for example. Alex Goldiş could have continued his reasoning by seeing that even though Crăciun does not reject postmodernism, he is more in Alexandru Muşina's corner than in Mircea Cărtărescu's and *The Vices of the Postmodern World*, is a sound proof of that.

Moreover, if we still want to see him on a totally different cultural path than Alexandru Muşina, there has to be noted that, with his determination not to let himself be mesmerized by the positive, progressive postmodernism, and lies perpetual way of opposing it to the traditional/ modern world, Crăciun is actually a representative of the strong though (as Gianni Vattimo described it). The opposition modern-postmodern ceases to be a mere stylistic feature but an actual sign of a thinking manner. Illustrations for this assertion can be found virtually at any given page and the preferred pattern is *in the traditional modern world vs. the postmodern world.*

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The *Vices of the Postmodern World* is a very distinct work compared to Gheorghe Crăciun's other theoretical writings. Set against works like *The Iceberg of Modern Poetry* or *Theatre of Operations*, *The Vices of the Postmodern World* stands out as nonetheless connected to theory and critical thinking but in a way open to a larger specter of potential readers, despite of the very condensed style. Somehow, this book is closer to sociology works that to literary criticism ones and this is maybe due to the facts that he extracts his illustrations from the contingency of real life.

As intended, the book lacks references, only one or two can be encountered along the way: one to Baudrillard (who seems to serve Gheorghe Crăciun as a model for the book, according to Alex Goldiş). The other is to Jean Francois Mattei's book *On Inner Barbarity*, which actually is reviewed in the text entitled *The Spine and the Creeping Plant.*

The relevance of Crăciun's observations in connection with the literary field is almost methodically avoided and reduced to a minimum. There is a very short paragraph at the end of the text entitled *Hiper-mega-super-trans*, where the author establishes a connection between postmodern language in its relation to reality and the predilection for autofiction and minimalism in literature (seen as ways of acknowledging the discourse incapacity of accommodate the complexity of the external world). In a way, it is very strange that such a dedicated writer as Gheorghe Crăciun chooses to approach new things from another perspective but it could also mean that he could have reached the conclusion that the phenomenon of postmodernism is worthwhile researching outside the pure literary field, especially in its most visible and direct expressions like the social ones are.

In this book there is a whole series of relevant images that gather to crystalize the bigger picture of Romanian post-communism postmodernism. As stated before, it is these very images that induce the writing and the ideas, so they cannot be fully labelled either as generators or relevant illustrations. With this double status in mind, the identification and analysis of these images can prove itself useful for the whole process of understanding the concept of Postmodernism with Gheorghe Crăciun.

The first image with a creative potential is that of the commercial billboard for Media Galaxy shop, advertising a great variety of cameras, over 30 models (image quoted before). What actually strikes a chord inside the writer is the word *great variety*, which surprisingly, constitutes itself as a reason for theoretical meditation:

> I was stuck by its keyword quality and I started to think about reality that its meanings covered. There was no doubt: this time, the word was a marketing concept, one of those universal concepts, hard and grey as basalt, good for all (I remembered that even socialist economy was not immune to it), always put forward in an occasion or another as a commercial incentive. (Crăciun 2011: 14)

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This is where the author actually chooses the path to take for the entire series of articles that follow (and, eventually, the book that they come to form). This external, observable reality makes him want to start his book on the very subway platform where he stands. Moreover, the book itself cannot be other that an illustration of this external apparently objective reality and this is why Crăciun rejects any references and opts instead for a *living book*, fresh out of his own cultural schizoidism. This is actually a key idea, because the objective, externally observable reality is a mere illusion. A wonderfully mastered one, but still an illusion because the images Gheorghe Crăciun chooses to cut out are relevant for his own frame of mind, for his skeptic thinking of postmodernism and ultimately for the goals he buries in each and every text. It is just like a camera, which apparently cannot prefer what to film and what not to, but in fact can be very easily and subjectively controlled.

As a matter of fact, the commercial billboard is nothing more than a small element in the greater mechanism of the postmodernist consumer society, together with other thousands of commercials, brands, packaging, offers, discounts and sales. The contemporary man is first of all a consumer and this is why everything around him is an incentive to consume:

> On margarine box covers, CD's with the seductions of Ancient Greece were implanted. You eat branded waffles and you can win the latest car model. Women's magazines are no longer limited to the advertising of a product, they are also competing in sampling and attaching it to their pages. Shopping bags have long ceased to be neutral containers. They play the role of an information covering, saying where, how and why. (Crăciun 2011: 26-27)

This is essentially the basis of a relationship between consumer and product: you want things that you need and then you want things you did not know that you needed but which promised you beauty, health, social status.

We no longer wear new looking clothes, there is a trend for clothes who looked already worn and who come like this fresh from the factory (Crăciun 2011: 31). The meaning is that we can skip this process of wearing them in order to make them look used, we no longer need to undergo this corruptive action of time, which has a negative value today. Furthermore, if you buy already worn looking clothes, you no longer have the privilege of creating a personal relationship with that object because objects no longer need to be valued and cherished but instead they have to constantly be exchanged for their latest version. While the already used looking clothes are a trend that democratizes wearing because we no longer need or want to tolerate the old. This situation with clothes finds its answer in the need to mark your freedom by means of hairstyle and accessories, the only possible ways left to protect yourself and your uniqueness:

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> spiky hair, wildly shaggy, according to well researched recipes of the young today. Combed and hair sprayed hairstyles which contradict the idea of a comb. The Mohawk haircut, intentionally loose buns with carelessly free stands. Traces, signs, letters, messages cut through the hair on the scalp. Rope woven strands, shaved heads showing the threatening fragility of the skull, the girls get sure to comb their hair with their hand, in a hurried, exalted throw, the boys' middle parting hair and the rising motion of the head with the purpose of ordering the looks. And further, the macho hats just like in American jails, female caps with ponytail tassels, earrings hanging up to the lower jaw line, semicircular sunglasses, leather wrist straps, toe rings, tattoos. Individual freedom, personal brand distinguishing yourself in relation with others, self—protection. (Crăciun 2011: 33)

Another very relevant image for Romanian postmodernism as Gheorghe Crăciun comprehends it is that of the garbage, seen in a dichotomist comparison communism-consumerism. This is again a stance of congested enumeration list, where all the elements add up to compose a harassing and haunting image. Yesterday's garbage was the expression of the poverty in communist years, it was ash grey and containing nothing more than what could not further be reused, like extremely clean bones, dirty pieces of newspaper, domestic litter and food debris. The key term here is the pestilent:

> Romanian garbage was, until a decade and a half ago, ultimately pestilent. You even felt like the smells were stronger than the waste that produced them. Because you could find virtually everything in those huge especially placed containers from potato peels and cabbage leaves, vegetable scraps, chicken bones, claws, cartilages and skins, moldy bread, cat droppings in newspaper, broken bottles, the linty household dust of weekly cleanings, the dirty mix of poverty. (Crăciun 2011: 40)

There is an obvious progress at this level because post-communist garbage is essentially defined by color and variety. This is actually a cultural change expressing the need of the Romanians to happily exorcise the frustrations of the privations imposed by the communism. This is done by over exercising the right and the need to consume, they seem to feel like overeating and especially exercise shopping can indeed heal the trauma of starvation. This is in turns illustrated by the garbage they produce nowadays, which is shockingly colorful and shiny.

> Their brilliance came from the countless packs of coffee, peanuts, biscuits, chocolates, sticks, chips, cigarettes, beer cans and soft drinks plastic bottles – a clear sign that Romanians took the sops offers very seriously and they tried to escape as soon as possible from its recent food frustrations. (Crăciun 2011: 41)

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Another defining image is that of God as a DJ, as stated in a graffiti that Crăciun sees. Alex Goldiș accuses him of not establishing the needed intertext with the song with the same name belonging to Faithless. Leaving aside the hypothesis that he actually did not know the song, what is really important is its creative power, just like the case of Media Galaxy commercial billboard. This formulation literally triggers the demonstration that in the godless context of the postmodern world, God could indeed be perceived as a DJ:

> so why could it be not true that God is a disk-jockey specialized in soaking time, objects, our vulnerable human beings? This facts seems even truer as the wall that has become the holder of this laughable definition belongs to a workers building, at the disposal of gang boys. (Crăciun 2011: 61)

The structure is yet again comparative, opposing the old, impersonal, traditional God (seen as both the writer and the conductor of a score he can change anytime) to a modern one, which has the sacred quality of being driven by inspiration: "God as a DJ can only be a young God, just starting, with headphones over His ears and His fingers on the keyboard, incessantly concentrating on his work, with no time to rest, relentlessly artistic." (Crăciun 2011: 64)

The postmodern God uses the CD (in itself another paradigmatic product of postmodernity), which he can alter whatever he likes. His authority has not disappeared, it has transgressed to a form of power dictated by the inspiration:

> He can morph from man to woman, from child to old person, from Jesus to Kurt Cobain, the watchers the people dance the hip-hop rhythm, He clones His presences in the profane, He rejoices together with us, He has become cofratern and visible without giving up His pedestal and His decision-making power. (Crăciun 2011: 65)

In other words, not even God can escape the fundamental changes that postmodernism brings about and, nevertheless, He is able of adjusting to the new world and its needs.

The last text of the cycle, entitled *The Solitude of the Mobile Phone User*, is perhaps the most powerful of all in terms of paradigmatic images. It is very interesting to note that Crăciun's considerations from 2006 are actually mainstream issues nowadays, when mobile phone use has reached its peak so far. Basically, the text tackles upon the problem of communication seen as refusal by modernism and rediscovery by postmodernism. However, the rediscovery is actually an illusion, the level of the need to communicate has remained the same throughout the centuries. What postmodernism does though is to offer the technical means which make instant communication possible. It is actually a fake form of communication and in fact we

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deal with the fear of solitude and the need for protection disguised as such: "Man's fear of loneliness increased and the mobile phone holder is the tragic symbol of our world." (Crăciun 2011: 88-89)

Another illusion adds up that the mobile phone is a symbol of freedom and communication and, consequently, that everything is allowed both at the individual and at the collective level. Each and every person holding a mobile phone feels secure that the world is at his reach whenever he needs it. At the same time the world is still far enough to make him feel like he controls the situation.

> Mobile telephoning is the prerogative of a man mobile himself, who can be deployed at any time, always hurrying and who is always prone to confuse instability with novelty. It manages to give the individual something of the condition of the invisible man and something of the identity of the incognito character. It does not allow him neither to hide nor to be fully present in your actions and thus it maintains a profitable duplicate existence. (Crăciun 2011: 89)

The reader is left to wonder where this text would have gone next and what other very insightful notations it would have contained on this topic. The text would have probably continued by analyzing the consequences of such a duplicate existence and its impact on intimacy and the inner self. Somehow, the reader can make an informed guess on how the writer would have interpreted mobile technology at its very best so far in the form of smartphones. However, *The Solitude of a Mobile Phone User* is a very exact framing of Romanian cultural realities of 2006, just like any other text in the book. The clippings act both as triggers and as illustrations if insightful ideas. What has to be continuously kept in mind nevertheless is that, despite their appearance of objective endeavors, they are as subjective and infused with personal opinions as the whole conceptualizing process is.

How exactly does Gheorghe Crăciun define postmodernism in its living and breathing form in the social and cultural context that he analyzes in *The Vices of the Postmodern World*? One must always keep in mind the fact that the writer is not really the fan of this concept (as mentioned before, he is actually more a representative of the strong thought rather than of the weak one) and that the context is the post-communist postmodern Romanian society of the 2000s. As noted above, the contemporaneousness character of the book cannot be overlooked. Moreover, in order to derive the author's view, one has to go through each and every text of the series because he never settles for a simple didactic approach where he states the definition and then gives the plain and customary examples but instead he prefers to dissipate both (his defining phrases and his examples) in the way he sees fit for both his greater purpose and for the structure, theme and idea of each and every piece of the text. Still, before defining postmodernism, Gheorghe Crăciun identifies its most important three characteristics, as he calls them *perverted substitutes of metaphysical sign*, namely speed, variety and the object seen as a commercial

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product. He carefully defines each of them in the second text of the series, entitled *When is the Last Card Played*. What is really interesting about the way he defines them is the continuous interdependence among them. For example for stating what speed is, in his view and in the context of the postmodern reality, Crăciun uses the other two concepts incessantly joining them in the effort to articulate in writing what he first noticed in real life and what gave him food for thought. Thus, speed is not understood in the modern, avant-garde meaning. It is

> the expressive speed, the speed as a drug, the speed with invincible wings, the speed on aircushions, the speed of information, of bits, of transfers and transactions, the speed of our instantaneous displacement through the spaces of given paradigms. (Crăciun 2011: 22)

Postmodern variety is defined in opposition to variety in nature, where it is negatively valued. Paradigmatic sites of the contemporary world, such as the supermarket or the Internet must be addressed in sections and one should carefully choose one's path. Reality has to be organized in a way and thus variety proves itself to be a mere illusion. The definition for this concept is perhaps the least unfolded and this is strange in a way because this is the exact world and reality that acted as a catalyst for the *The Vices of the Postmodern World.*

The object seen as a commercial product defines itself in relation with the value given to any product both by its status of manufactured object (and thus superior to anything in nature) and by its perisability, which in turns is defined by speed. As stated before, these three essential characteristics of the postmodern post-communist Romanian society (in a broader sense, applicable to any capitalist reality) are not only interrelated, they also constitute the base and the reason of the book being a mirror not of a literary philosophical trend but rather of tangible facts because they are actually tied to the more comprehensive domains that describe reality in a scientific way, such as economy and sociology.

Postmodernism itself does not have a fixed and clear stated definition. As the reality it describes, its meaning with Gheorghe Crăciun is also shifting, always changing (at least in expression), fluid-like. A worthwhile enterprise is to closely examine all the defining stances and to see whether the vision is global or not, despite the serialized form, the working hypothesis being that the full image is indeed a coherent one. Postmodernism is defined both passively (by means of what it is) and actively (by what it does like here: "Postmodernism attacks from all directions and mocks every possible ideology" (Crăciun 2011: 37). Postmodernism is basically anything and everything of today, of the present: "Postmodernism is a social and artistic mega phenomenon in which the world has transgressed the language and specialized institutions which administrate it" (Crăciun 2011: 68). Postmodernism is essentially a crisis, of the language, of the subject, of the world and its features. Today's world changes the human being and his interiority (not

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forgetting about the exterior either) with such speed and violence that would have seemed impossible fifty years ago and, at the same time, it offers the possibility of freeing oneself from subordination and paternalism because it is not a world of obligations, constraints and prohibition. The postmodern world is able to offer everything to the person whose sole obligation is to consume and who only seems to live in order to be served, in order to receive everything you want and everything you did not know you wanted. Everything is at your own disposal, everything in just one click away or even closer and you almost feel forced to become lazy and hard to please because you will always find something to suit your desires (which you mistake for needs) and your budget and, in the end, to make you happy just until a newer version appears. Still, it is not a world without dangers and challenges: "Postmodernism forms a liquid world, where you always have to swim, to surf, to randomly navigate, to sink – yes, certainly! and where you are always under the risk of drowning" (Crăciun 2011: 68).

The need to rediscover communication is a false one and it is only a reflection of living in a media-infused world. The need for communication has not changed and what we today perceive as such is in fact the need to be protected, to feel safe when connected to someone through a mobile phone for example.

In what regards postmodernism's relationship to modernism, it must be said that the first acts as an integration of the latter but seen as a luxury prey: [Postmodernism] "does not destroy its symbolic metaphysic but it deconstructs its organism and it consumes it" (Crăciun 2011: 85) in "an act of ritual anthropophagi though which the new savage eats in order to hide and to make disappear what it consumes not for the purpose of nutrition" (Crăciun 2011: 85) in order to discontinue history and not to instate a new one.

As stated before, the image of postmodernism as Gheorghe Craciun sees it build itself just like a puzzle, piece by piece, even if some of the pieces are dark and others light error colorful. There are no major internal contradictions along the way (while could have happened due to the serialized form), which is a clear sign of the fact that the author's vision bears an internal coherence and that he had the time to find solutions and explanations to each and every possible contradiction and inconsistences. It is, after all, a personal comprehension of a very controversial topic which started to be investigated decades ago and which still represents a hot topic in the academic world and not only. Gheorghe Crăciun's version, as immersed into the Romanian cultural reality as it is, has the obvious asset of looking closely at reality, of gathering some conclusions based on a minute and intimate observation. Sure, some strings are left untied and the reader can only wonder if this was because of the strict requirements of an article space, because of the writer's lack of theoretical comprehension, due to his continuously deteriorating health or simply because he was running out of time. This issue will probably be addressed once the archive he left behind will be available to the public but the few pages of diary at the end of *The Vices of the Postmodern World* are already an indicator of the fact that the final word of the matter is still left unsaid.

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Alex Goldiş's opinion, however valuable, cannot be fully agreed upon. Stating that the book has some major flaws (for example it does not tackle upon the complex relationship between postmodernism an consumer society and it prefers to blame all evils in the first on the latter), Alex Goldiş sees Crăciun "as a more of an innocent yet skeptic observer of early Romanian consumerism than an extremely rational analyst, able to explain it and sensibly rank its cultural consequences" (Goldiş 2012:1). However, the reviewer blames this situation either on a premature Romanian free market or on the early death of a writer he sees capable of even more convincing analysis. It is undoubtedly the case with an author like Gheorghe Crăciun, who has an extraordinary amplitude of though and who, despite not being above reproach in what concerns his ideas and frame of mind, still remains a very complex and valuable writer and thinker of present days. *The Vices of the Postmodern World* is yet another sign that he has not exhausted his power of stimulating debate on relevant topics in the cultural field.

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