Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 4 (53) No.1 - 2011

MIRCEA NEDELCIU'S MYSTERIOUS TERRITORIES

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Abstract: *This article deals with the mysterious side of Mircea Nedelciu's fictional geography. Often underestimated by the critics in terms of their aesthetic and conceptual value, these "mysterious territories" (utopian "mysterious islands" and "vanishing points") play, however, an important part in the overall signification system of Nedelciu's works. In order to prove it, I have identified them and interpreted their symbolic value(s) through recent anthropological and cultural theories concerning the concepts of* space *and* utopia*, thus showing that they are a main contribution to the literary representation of the author's* weltanschaaung.

Keywords: *fictional geography, mysterious territories, identity, utopia.*

The scholarly reader might wonder to what extent a discussion about (and around) the mysterious dimension of the fictional geography would be relevant in the case of a writer such as the *optzecist* Mircea Nedelciu, who seems to be most appreciated by the critique when he (re)creates the utmost commonplace, "workaday" reality, rather than when he ventures in the realm of the "fantastic"[1].

Nonetheless, my idea is that a more minute analysis and a broader, synthetic and somewhat theoretical perspective upon Mircea Nedelciu's fictional treatment of space, focused on what I will call here "mysterious territories" and based on his first three novels and four tomes of short stories, might hint at (or add to) the conceptual background of his work as a whole, and change the aesthetic perception upon the matter.

For this purpose, I will identify those territories in Mircea Nedelciu's fictions that disrupt the coherence of the physical geography contrived by the writer, and I will establish their symbolical charge(s), in order to reveal the "theory behind".

Certainly, my concept of "mysterious territory" will go, to some extent, beyond the literal sense of the term. First, because my perspective upon Mircea Nedelciu's fictional geography is influenced not only by the literary field, but also by anthropological, sociological and generally cultural views, implicitly or explicitly referring to the notion of *utopia* and to the concept of *space* and its overtones. Second, because in this paper I will treat those recurrent fictional locations that provide Nedelciu's work with its indefinably fabulous touch, going from literal "vanishing points" and utopian settlements, to interior, subjectively (re)defined settings.

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Before I start, it is important to mention that in Mircea Nedelciu's fiction, certain scenery elements or geographic zones have a way of reoccurring – just like certain characters – under (slightly or visibly) different "disguises" or "hidden identities". This mechanism obviously sends back to the roots of the "realist" novel and to *The Human Comedy* of Honoré de Balzac, as it merges and concentrates the fictional universe into an articulated whole, one meant to be rationally credible as an accurate life-like model. However, with Mircea Nedelciu this "articulation", the coherence of the whole, does not tend to (or seek to) be rationally flawless as with Balzac. Its surface is fragmented, baroque to a certain extent, very permeable to subjective perception and sometimes contradictory; this happens even when beyond it, the traits of the same somewhat recognisable physical "geography" can be approximated. The image thus resembles one that could be formed under a broken deforming lens – or, as Gheorghe Crăciun put it (Crăciun 146), one formed by crumbling reality inside a *kaleidoscope*.

This is how – and why – inside the relatively aggregated scenery, actual "fractures" randomly appear where the "pieces of the broken lens" do not "fit back in" properly. Or – if I were to use Gheorghe Crăciun's image – this happens in the spaces left between the crumbs of reality forming the model. Thus, Nedelciu sometimes creates certain spots of hazardous territory, genuine "vanishing points", little "black holes" or "Bermuda triangles", where the (un)fortunate traveller is bound to disappear. These nebulae are blotches that often lead to hidden or parallel geography, spaces that cannot be found on any map (or even drawn on one), for they have a way of vanishing if approached unwarily, or, in any case, they remain closed to the public eye. I have called "mysterious islands" such mischievous décors, for they remind me, to some extent, of captain Nemo's uncharted island.

In the short story *Topographers and Typographers* [*Tipografi şi topografi*][2] Nedelciu alludes to an idea that forms, in my opinion, the basic principle of his own construction of the fictional geography. The first person narrator takes up a job at a "topo-typographic" centre and finds out that the maps drawn up there are far from being exact. Unavoidable measurement errors are being "corrected" according to fantasy in such a way as to fit the big picture. And this, while "any alteration, say one of a few microns, could lead to incontrollable aberrations inside our only exact image of the places, aberrations equivalent on the field to the dislocation of a hill, village or city, to the disruption of a river, the appearance of a tree 150 meters thick, or to the vanishing of a house. Thus, […] if a physical image of a Place isn't workable, than what other image of it could be considered exact?" (Nedelciu, 2003, 339). Nedelciu's own representation of geography (and of the world itself) remains fateful to this same principle of slight… infidelity. This is, I think, how and why my "mysterious islands" and "vanishing points" came into being. But let's identify (some of) them and discuss them briefly.

Such a place is, to start with, the utopian colony of "Valea Plânşii" [The Valley of Weeping] – not idly called so, for it drives back to Romanian folklore, fairy-tales and myths. In traditional tales, *Valea Plângerii* is a *topos* of deceitful utopia, a beautiful but forbidden, out-of-space place, from where, whoever is tempted to enter, is bound never to return. Nedelciu's surreal setting from the novel *Confabulatory Treatment* [*Tratament Fabulatoriu*] preserves these features and enriches them. Valea Plânşii forms a hallucinatory cluster inside a very realistic, creditable setup – one of Nedelciu's recurrent sceneries – that of the village Fuica near Bucharest. Fuica, with its impressive (but somewhat,

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"displaced") fitotron, is a literary transposition of the writer's own hometown, Fundulea, with which it sometimes fictionally coexists (see Nedelciu, 2006, 81). Its lively description is somewhat typical for many villages in Bărăgan plain, as they looked during the communist era. The once traditional village now has asphalt streets, bus stations and it is invaded by communist modernisation and cutting-edge scientific setups: meteorological stations, fitotrons; some unfinished constructions of communist architecture, built up during the "cooperativization" process initiated by Gheorghiu-Dej, linger around the village, as a token of the regime's (over)ambitious, unachievable projects. An eclectic crowd made up of locals, commuters coming from the city and, sometimes, gipsies, populates the place. To sum up, Fuica, as a setting, would normally allude to anything but to the fabulous fantastic space that seems to open up nearby.

Hidden by a "trick" played by the sinuous trajectory of the river that separates Fuica from Temenia (the other part of the village), by the forest and the winding geography, near Fuica apparently lays a place of wonder. On the set of a long-abandoned manor in Valea Plânşii, close to which an agricultural communist establishment was meant to be built some decades ago – leaving back only the desolate ruin of an unfinished tower block – now lies a secret and prosperous colony of utopians. Half hippies, half Fourierists, to some extent Mormons, and, most of all, idealist dreamers, these refugees from the world outside live mostly on their own farm products and rarely leave the secret valley. As a community, the "colonists" are peaceful open-minded people; they have seemingly managed to create a perfect society from which inequity has been successfully banished (by having eliminated private property – as well as the very concept of *possession*). Their most important occupation is, nonetheless, a cultural one: as anthropologist Marc Augé would put it, they are all working hard to (re)*symbolise* (i.e. to (re)fill with anthropological meaning) the *space* they now populate. Each member is a researcher (and, to some extent, a myth-creator), going out of the colony at times in order to find clues about the former occupants of the territory they inhabit.

Like in any utopia, things begin to shrink and the community eventually dissolves in an unexpected manner, apparently leaving no trace behind. The same fictional geography reappears in Nedelciu's last novel, *The Diver's Sign* [*Zodia scafandrului*]: there is the old manor again, along with its surroundings; it is once again placed in the neighbourhood of Fuica, this time on the outskirts of "Boroana" village. Its history resembles the one it had in Valea Plânşii: it is known to have been owned by a strange character perfectly resembling the real biographic person of the dandy writer Mateiu Caragiale (called "grandpa Marcu" ["bunicul Marcu"] in *Confabulatory Treatment* and "boyard Matei" ["boierul Matei"] in *The Diver's Sign*); all the same, the old bourgeois domain has been nationalised during Gheorghiu Dej's regime and the relics of an unfinished communist construction thrive next to the main building of the estate. In the same area, there is also another Sion family domain, called "La Cocoane" ["Their Ladyships' Estate"], which appears in both novels (as well as in Mateiu Caragiale's real biography). Hence, the two novels share, at least partially, the same *hinterland*[3] (that of their author's hometown, Fundulea) and the same fictional geography. However, in *The Diver's Sign*, even if the whereabouts of the place coincide (loosely) with those where the mysterious Valea Plânşii community had been placed in *Confabulatory Treatment*, no visible trace of the colony can be grasped anymore; no local stories mention it, as if it had never been there.

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Moreover, even in *Confabulatory Treatment*, the status of the Valea Plânşii settlement is highly ambiguous. Whereas the physical place itself (along with its anthropological relics: the manor, the old church, the communist ruin etc.) is (fictionally) "real", as its vague coordinates are known to some of the oldest villagers of Fuica (such as grandpa Pătru), the illusory aura of the utopian settlement is emphasised by the fact that it doesn't unravel itself to anyone except for the (supposedly) "mentally deranged" meteorologist Luca, who accidentally "discovers" the place and becomes obsessed with it. Besides him and an old gipsy tribe, no one is ever able to find the old way through again – or even willing to risk going there, as the place is symbolically marked by a history of unfortunate "illegalist" stories, those of several "bourgeois exploiters", (fake) "aristocrats" and "enemies" of the regime. The implicit political terror coming from the Centre gives way to superstition; therefore the mere existence of the valley is ignored by anyone who doesn't want to get into trouble. In addition, a certain dream-like, surreal and mythical atmosphere envelops the inhabitants and the setting in Valea Plânşii, the logic of the place and its events are not always coherent, and material evidence of the settlement's actual existence are immediately compensated by contradictory clues.

Nonetheless, the fleeting geographical space itself seems to keep its real existence, as well as its "magical" properties. Even if the hero of the story apparently admits to having imagined the community in Valea Plânşii, the reader is bound to doubt this public confession: the meteorologist could have been simply protecting the secrecy of the place, in order to prevent harmful outside intervention. Furthermore, the vanishing, in the end of the story, of "painter V. (Vio)" – who had come from Bucharest to seek out for the colony – is yet another contradictory allusion. The mystery outlives Luca's story as the fabulous vanishing point goes on swallowing up small fractions of reality, which presumably "cross over" to the *other*, fantastic realm.

The writer avoids disambiguisation, thus creating (arguably) his most complex "mysterious island". The Valea Plânşii setup would be, within the context of the fictional universe of the novel – and that of his works as a whole – a brilliant illustration of Michel Foucault's concept of an *Other Place*, i.e. a place that has "the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (Foucault 254). To be more specific, Valea Plânşii is a *utopia* in relation to the real (communist) society represented in the book. In addition, the colony functions in the meantime as a literary *heterotopia* within the boundaries of the novel's fictional universe, i.e. (according to Michel Foucault) as the physical achievement of a utopia, a "counter-site", "a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other sites that can be found within a culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted" (Foucault 254).

Valea Plânşii actually resembles Foucault's *heterotopia* in more than one way. If we think about the fact that it can "juxtapose in a single place several spaces, several sites, that are, in themselves, incompatible" (Foucault 257) – such as, in our case, the old boyar estate, the communist establishment of "Temelia Nouă" and the refuge of "illegalist" Fiston Gulianu – we will find that Valea Plânşii incorporates – reverts or assimilates – the real traditional and communist societies altogether. Moreover, these societies appear to have successively marked the place as a "not freely accessible" one; the "system of opening and closing which both isolates them and makes them

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penetrable" (Foucault 258) is a characteristic trait of what the French thinker calls "heterotopias of crisis", that is to say "a privileged, sacred or forbidden place, reserved exclusively for individuals who are, in relation to society and the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis" (Foucault 255). And last, Valea Plânşii could be described as a Foucaldian *heterotopy* because it has "a function in relation to the remaining space" (Foucault 259). In order to determine this function of Nedelciu's *heterotopia*, I have used another French scholar's ideas, Marc Augé, and his characterisation of pure anthropological *space*. He states that: "returning […] to the non-place of space, escaping from the totalitarian constraints of place [namely relational, historical and identity constraints], will be just like returning to something resembling freedom" (Augé 116). And Valea Plâşii is indeed a location where the centre's influence is almost negligible, and which thus becomes a standpoint from where anthropological *territory* and its sociological features can be better grasped and reappraised. Finally, let's not forget that for Michel Foucault, "colonies are […] extreme examples of *heterotopia*" (Foucault 260), and Nedelciu's so-called "colony" (also called "phalanstery", sometimes in the novel) functions in more than one respect as a proper one.

Still, the complex set-up in Valea Plânşii is not the only "mysterious territory" imagined by Nedelciu. There are, for instance, some hiking routes along which "vanishing points" (implicitly leading to parallel realms or not) are scattered. One of them can be found again in *Confabulatory Treatment*: it's the one leading to the meteorological station on "Muntele Mare" ["High Peak"], where Ula (and possibly, her father) have (seemingly) disappeared. Another, more explicit mountainous vanishing point is the one appearing in the short story *A Trip towards Denial* [*Călătorie în vederea negaţiei*], where the hero not only disappears on his way towards Parângu peak, but the narrative voice actually speculates that he might have joined a mysterious "proletarian colony" of communist constructors somewhere in the mountains. The theme of the communist proletarian colonies, such as the "National Construction Site of Bumbeşti-Livezeni", Petrimanu, Vidra or Voineasa, is developed earlier in the story, and as the plot moves towards its end, the author notes: "Nobody ever searched for him there [in those colonies]" (Nedelciu, 2003, 174). Just as in *Confabulatory Treatment*, the "mystery" is left "unsolved" by the writer; fact is that the hero's tracks are definitely lost – they seem to become unrecognisably someone else's, according to the storyteller – and he is never to be found again.

Another type of "vanishing points" in Nedelciu's stories are those usually created by excessive snowfalls. Snow not only contributes to Ula's vanishing in *Confabulatory Treatment*, but it sometimes tends to function as an actual superposed, parallel geographic layer, an aggressive and extreme *non-place* – if I were to use another one of Marc Augé's terms (Augé 100). It "eats up" objects, persons and even tends to annihilate entire villages in Bărăgan plain. This hyperbolically Siberian feature of Nedelciu's fictional geography swallows anything from plastic balls to houses in the short story *A search in the snow* [*O căutare în zăpadă*], and some of the smaller items seem to melt away with it in spring, vanishing without a trace (see Nedelciu, 2003, 472-476). Some other times, such as in the beginning of the novel *The Diver's Sign*, the Bărăgan snow becomes a menace to man himself: the young Diogene Sava almost perishes while falling into a sort of "quicksnow" hole – just as if swallowed up in quicksand. This kind of *non-place* imagined by Nedelciu thus works as a "black

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hole", annihilating the anthropological features of geographic places, a phenomenon that hence becomes a menace not only to identity, but also to the very existence of objects, buildings, people or small settlements. Its symbolism is rather clearly hinted to in *The Diver's Sign*, where these odd "Siberian"-like climatic conditions in the Bărăgan plain are implicitly associated to the emergence of the incipient communist era. The obsession of the coming Cold is recurrent in the novel and it allegorically describes the anguish and the quiet desperation of the rural communities facing the process of "cooperativization", as well as the larger-scale phenomena of industrialisation and forced modernisation.

Other small and more abstract "vanishing points", without "mysterious islands" of their own, shortly appear along marginal city streets or village roads, under the cover of darkness, like in the short story entitled *A Clock to Zero* [*Ora spre zero*] and in a memorable scene in Nedelciu's first novel, *Plain Strawberries* [*Zmeura de câmpie*]. These are rather like small identity whirlpools, spaces where identity alone gets distorted. In *Plain Strawberries*, Gelu Popescu experiences an awkward feeling of identity loss as he walks down a dark street in an unknown village. The scenery suddenly seems to him unpredictable and oddly dilated as he is trying to find an old mill situated at the end of the road, and Gelu becomes to "doubt" his "own identity" (Nedelciu, 1984, 94-95). The old mill itself is beginning to behave like a sort of *Fata Morgana*: "but […] this road doesn't seem to be turning towards the mill's (or the "local industry's") courtyard at all; (this alone is enough to get you into a frenzy, this ambiguity: is it a mill or a "local industry" siege, is it one or two houses further on) and not even a shimmer of light can be grasped at the other end. You stop for a second so as not to perturb the silence with the plashes of your shoes in the mud: and no mill's brawling can be heard anywhere near!" (Nedelciu, 1984, 94-95). In the other story, *A Clock to Zero*, the nameless hero finds himself in an awkward situation, while on a small peripheral city street about the existence of which he has no memory at all – despite the fact that he often passes by that actual spot. Much in the same way as in the scene from *Plain Strawberries* presented earlier, identities twist unpredictably, phenomenon that here will end up giving the protagonist an actual metaphysical fright. As he meets a lady who asks him about sanguine groups in the middle of the night, and as he progressively discovers that she is old and ugly, he has the blurry intuition that this encounter has something to do with the premonition of his own death. These small hallucinatory *loci* thus tend to sweep away the hero to an unknown, concretely indefinable and anguishing space, where identity, logic, conventions or the real world itself seem *dislocated* and they back away in favour of *solitude* and the pure *textualisation* of space. Similar small spatial disorders happen in dark elevators, like (again) in *A clock to Zero*, in the first lines of *The Diver's Sign* or in the short story *Trouble with Identity* [*Probleme cu Identitatea*]. The short passages describing the phenomenon are short, soberly cut discursive fragments: "He enters the dark elevator. He fumbles for the ground floor button. The lowering in the dark induces fear." (Nedelciu, 2000, 5) or "the elevator was functional, but the light wasn't working. I went up without noticing it (…). But as I went back down, because there was no light in the elevator and on the corridors all the lights were shut, I had the feeling that I was going down, and down, and down again and that the descent would never end, like in the nightmares you have when you dream" (Nedelciu, 2003, 563). In all three stories, the elevator evokes death and fear, dislocating the hero and separating him from the real world and

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its familiar scenery. These relative "vanishing points" are hence an intuition of (and metaphorically, open, subjective portals towards) the final destination of any individual, the final "crossing over".

The deep waters of the sea and its underworld represent the same supreme vanishing point. In *The Diver's Sign* and in the Sci-Fi short story that inspired it, *The First Exile by Chronoscope* [*Primul exil la cronoscop*], going under water signifies (just like the descent in the elevator) death, *catabasis*, the ultimate disappearing act. In addition to that, the sea menaces to swallow entire parts of the civilised world in *The First Exile by Chronoscope*: it has submerged Venice and tends to do the same with the Romanian littoral city where the action takes place; the protagonist drowns as he cannot bear the isolation. In *The Diver's Sign*, the sea, its underworld and the growing pressure of above waters seem to play a rather symbolic part (at least, to the point where the novel was interrupted by Nedelciu's own passing over in 1999). They again symbolise the agonies of death, this time tragically assumed inside (and outside) the book by the author himself; but alternatively, they also stand for the exterior pressures that encumber individual existence (society, illness).

These latter "vanishing points" (snow, dark marginal roads, descending elevators and underwater territories) are actually expressions of a reality that is being invaded and absorbed by interior spaces – or "subjective non-places", as I would dare call them.

To close my approach, I will summarise that the mysterious portals towards a seemingly "fantastic" fictional "geography" created by Nedelciu could be defined as a category of **literary *non-places***, as they tend to neutralise history, identity, time and space; and, as they presumably have a way of projecting characters, objects or entire communities into apparently fabulous, unearthly realms – actual or subjective – they have much in common, sometimes, to Michel Foucault's notion of ***heterotopia***. These uncharted territories, almost *sacred* places (in Mircea Eliade's terms), hence function with Nedelciu, in my opinion, as expressions of the **relativity** that governs our world and eventually, our existence. Ion Ion's theory about *Moëbius' Strip* shaped spaces, in *Confabulatory treatment*, also points out (ultimately) to the incongruence of the *cosmos* (in the most Platonian sense of the word) and to the resigned "internalisation" of this unholy revelation: "«Well […] if you know that a plane shaped as a strip, which is twisted once and united at its ends results in Moëbius' Strip, on which you can advance endlessly and still never know when you got on the other side of the plane, than this means you can also imagine that nature could very well do the same thing […] to a given space!» «How come?» – asked Abraş. «Just like that!»" (Nedelciu 2006, 136).

Gheorghe Crăciun noted about the "image of reality" created by Nedelciu, that "this non-linear fabric, with its relentless aspirations to simultaneity" stands for "the actual diversity of the world, its complexity" (Crăciun 140); he (rightfully) thought that "this kind of story-writing contains a certain degree of hallucination; a world made out of fractures, leaps, gaps and compact surfaces, syncopated rhythms", a world in "continuous construction" that "tends to refuse to arrange itself in a given structure", is meant to express "a certain indeterminism of life" and tends to "grasp a new world in its own newly-formed shapes" (Crăciun 147). Identity disintegration thus characterises with Nedelciu the whole universe. The communist *hinterland* itself is partially evoked so as to illustrate this same fundamental shift the (post)modern era brought along with it, namely the generalised identity crisis (or crises).

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Mircea Nedelciu had indeed a very personalised – and intuitive – way of considering the relationships defining the world he lived in. The deformations of history and identity in the communist era, as well as the echoes of the postmodern shift coming from outside the "eastern camp" are acknowledged by the writer in such an intimate manner, that the entire fictional *chronotope* and its traditional functioning is sensibly modified by them in his prose. This is where, I think, the "typo-topographic theory" began, and where I think this fictional cohabitation of real and (improperly called) "fantastic" dimensions, forming a kind of a "double calendar", should lead us to in the end. Nedelciu's vision should be interpreted as an exploration of a universe inside which normal and abnormal conditions, order and disorder, and in the end, rules and their exceptions paradoxically – but naturally – coexist within the limits of the same geographic – or geometric – perimeter; they are to be interpreted as subjective and objective realities that form neither a unity nor a complementary opposition, but rather an intricate system of assonances and dissonances, intertwining endlessly.

Acknowledgement

This paper is supported by the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), ID76945 financed from the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government.

Notes

[1] For illustration on this assertion, see, for instance, Nicolae Manolescu (Manolescu, 2001, 291-292; Manolescu 2008, 1365-1367).

[2] Title and citation translations from Romanian to English are my own all along the paper.

[3] The term in its literary sense was coined by Nicolae Manolescu in his *Noah's Ark* [*Arca lui Noe*], by means of a transposition of Toynbee's homologue concept so as to describe the actual reality from which a book's fictional universe draws its inspiration.

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