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REFLECTIVE SURFACES IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE CAT'S EYE*

Abstract: During the sixties the use of reflective surfaces in the arts that usually took form of mirrors, eyes and water initiated a change in the way of perceiving the author's subjectivity and led to the questioning of ordinary form of vision. Margaret Atwood's interest in exploring various types of reflective surfaces in writing resulted in *The Cat's Eye* (1988), a novel about the painter Elaine Risley, who indulged herself in the process of creating paintings with objects that emit reflection. Although art distances Elaine from reality and takes her closer to the world of visions and hallucinations, where there is always more than one version of events or the self, it is simultaneously the main trigger of the change in her perspective. In the light of the theory of possible worlds that exist parallel to the real world, and the idea of making a necessary distinction between fictional and real entities, we tried to identify what is real/fictional in the heroine's perception of the world and point at the alternative ways of seeing through the analysis of the reflective surfaces in her artworks.

Keywords: fiction, reality, cat's eye, mirror, reflection, art, paintings

ART AS MIMESIS

The importance of optics in Greek culture is emphasized through Aristotle's theory of mimesis. In *On the Art of Poetry* he defines all types of what he considers artistic representations (poetry, drama and painting) as modes of imitation that differ only in their means, in the objects or in the manner of their imitations (Aristotle, 1920: 23). He points out that the poet is not fulfilling his role as imitator when saying this *in*

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propria persona and argues that the artists should be impersonal and not show themselves in their works (Aristotle, 1920: 83). On the contrary, the illusion of art as a mimetic device will be dismantled.

Unlike Aristotle, Plato and Socrates do not value the supposedly mirroring properties of representation due to the illusion they create. In *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, M. H. Abrams points out that Plato's concept of literary and artistic representations in *Republic* is based on the view that literature and art are as deceiving as the images formed in reflectors such as mirrors and water (Abrams, 1971: 30). Abrams insists on the fact that the literary and artistic representations are seen as twice distorted from the ideal world, just like the reflections in a mirror (Abrams, 1971: 34). Similarly to Plato, Socrates suggests that the "poet is an imitator, and therefore, like all other imitators; he is thrice removed from the King and from the truth" (Abrams, 1971: 8). In this traditional view, the artist's role is not considered to be significant either. Moreover, most aesthetic theories developed from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century revisit Plato, Aristotle and Socrates to formulate a view of art based on mimesis that provides an accurate and objective copy of reality. The more convincing the illusion of life/reality presented in the works of art and supported by the mirror metaphor, the better the art, as Brian Stonehill points out in *The Self-conscious Novel: Artifice in Fiction from Joyce to Pynchon* (Stonehill, 1988: 11).

The main limitations of the most famous theories of fiction based on the assumption that real world is the only "legitimate universe of discourse (referential domain)" are indicated in Ljubomir Doležel's theory of fictional semantics entitled *Heterocosmics: fiction and possible worlds*. The author argues against the main postulate of mimesis that fictional entities originate from reality because this definition automatically leads to the assumption that fictional entities are imitations or representations of real entities¹ (Doležel, 2008: 14-18). According to Doležel, even though fiction and reality are intermingled, a clear distinction should be made between real and fictional because fictional universe cannot function as the real world. Namely, if we transformed fictional characters, places and stories into real people, places and real-life events, we would reduce heterogeneous fictional worlds to the model of a single world based exclusively on human experience. No matter how real and accurate it may seem to be, a work of art is not an objective copy of reality. It is still a fictional product of the artist's subjective and personal vision of reality that may be in many ways distorted. In other words, Dickens' London or Atwood's Toronto cannot be a

¹ The sections from this book were translated by the author of the paper M.N.

substitute for the real London or Toronto. Both Atwood's Toronto and Dickens' London exist as fictional entities that resemble the real ones but can only be present in the fictional world of Margaret Atwood and Charles Dickens.

In the book entitled *Fiction, Knowledge and Imagination*, philosopher David Novitz places a special focus on the interrelation between the world of literature and our real world (Novitz, 1987). The author claims that there can be no genuine resemblances between fictional and nonfictional entities and that "one must always rely on the descriptions of some author or other" (Novitz, 1987: 129). In other words, learning about the actual world from the fictional world is possible if readers recognize certain resemblances between these two worlds. The moment the readers start doubting whether something they have learnt from a literary work can be applied to the real situation is the moment when the process of learning occurs. At that time, readers do not rely on their induction, emphatic knowledge or factual beliefs since they doubt the applicability of their past experience. They have to be able to hypothesize that their experience of the fictional world is applicable to the actual situation. The fictional statements are not assertions about the actual world and "readers adopt a critical attitude in assenting to a hypothesis derived from fiction" (Novitz, 1987: 132). Novitz claims that emphatic beliefs will engage readers in the imaginative activity and that they "will meditate a reader's assessment of the risks involved in the heroine's various responses to her predicament" (Novitz, 1987: 134), so that they could be able to have a range of possible ways of responding to a certain sort of problem.

The fictional worlds presented in literary works (for instance, the fictional worlds of all Atwood's works) have their own subcategory (fictional worlds of Atwood's heroines). Since all these worlds are possible worlds in fictional universe, each of them can be the center according to which we compare and contrast the others. The main female character in Atwood's *Cat's Eye* lives in her own fictional world (the world of art that is both her enslavement and escapism from the past). Her perception of reality is somehow disturbed by her internal turmoil (traumas in the past that affect her present state – they lead to visions and hallucinations). It is through her art that Elaine is able to leave the real world (her life in Toronto as a famous painter) and visit the other worlds that exist parallel to the real one. Namely, she is travelling to the other worlds through the visions that appear while she is gazing at reflective surfaces: water in the ravine, the cat's eye marble, the mirror that distorts. While visiting the other worlds, she comes to terms with the complexity of subjectivity and discovers her multiple self. Her perception of reality is in so much influenced by the fictional entities triggered by the real ones and vice versa. As she looks at her paintings exhibited in the gallery, she is able to leave the reality and move to the world of fantasy where she can set her own rules.

In the light of our discussion, it shall be noted that many authors have in various ways explored Atwood's use of reflective surfaces as modes of artistic representation in her novel *Cat's Eye*. In the paper entitled "Odaliskes in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*" Michelle Gadpaille argues that Atwood uses the paintings of her heroine, Elaine Risley, to deconstruct established codes of visual representation (Gadpaille, 2009). In the article "Mirror Images in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*" Nicole de Jong examines the way the female protagonist liberates herself from the gaze of her friend through the complex mirror imagery (De Jong, 2010). Madeleine Davies's paper "Self/Image: Reading the Visual in Atwood's Fictive Autobiographies" explores the use of visual images, particularly photographs, as agents of representation within any autobiographical account (Davies, 2017). In this paper we have tried to identify the alternative ways of seeing by examining the reflective surfaces in our heroine's paintings.

MIRRORS

Mirrors are used in both literature and art to present the artist's subjectivity and his multiple self. In *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, Atwood claims that artists are "double" because they possess secret identities (Atwood, 2003: 32). As a consequence, writers and artists carry not only a "Jekyll hand" and a "Hyde hand" but also the slippery and fragmented self. Atwood refers to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland and through the Looking-Glass*, in which Alice

goes through the mirror and then there is only one Alice, or only one that we can follow. Instead of destroying her double, the "real" Alice merges with the other Alice – the imagined Alice, the dream Alice, the Alice who exists nowhere [...]. The act of writing takes place at the moment when Alice passes through the mirror. At this one instant the glass barrier between the doubles dissolves and Alice is neither here nor there, neither art nor life (Atwood, 2003: 49–50).

Atwood suggests that Alice's identities merge once she enters the mirror. In the same way, the artists' selves blend with their identities reflected in the mirror of contemporary art. The same idea is explored in Elaine's paintings because they suggest the possibility of existence of the self in other fictional worlds.

There are many moments in the novel when Elaine looks at herself in the mirror and contemplates the complexity of subjectivity and limitations of her vision. At the very beginning of the novel she states that "[t]here's never only one of anyone" and later on she observes "I'm transitional; some days I look like a worn-out thirty five, others like a sprightly fifty. So much depends on the light, and the way you squint"

(Atwood, 1988: 6). She is aware of the limitations of her eyes and questions her visual perception:

Now I think, what if I just couldn't see what they looked like? Maybe it was as simple as that: eye problems. I'm having that trouble myself now: too close to the mirror and I'm a blur, too far back and I can't see the details. Who knows what kind of face I'm making, what kind of modern art I'm drawing onto myself? (Atwood, 1988: 6)

Elaine is also preoccupied with depiction of half faces that are, according to Jessie Givner "one of the most pervasive images of disfiguration" (Givner, 1992: 66). In Atwood's novel half faces suggest Elaine's awareness of the fact that "there's never only one of anyone". Cordelia's story about the twin sisters – "a pretty one and one who has a burn covering half her face" and Elaine's painting entitled *Half a Face* metaphorically present Elaine and Cordelia's life stories. We are encouraged to assume that Elaine's double is her devious friend who tortured her in the childhood. In Cordelia's story, the disfigured sister commits suicide "in front of the mirror out of jealousy [and] her spirit goes into the mirror" to take over her twin sister's body (Atwood, 1988: 233). In real life, Cordelia goes insane and physically disappears from Elaine's life, but never really goes away from her. As she contemplates her anxiety of seeing Cordelia in the art exhibition, Elaine confesses: "I'm not afraid of seeing Cordelia. I'm afraid of being Cordelia. Because in some way we changed places" (Atwood, 1988: 227). After the exhibition, Elaine remarks that the two of them are "two sides of one coin", a statement that is symbolically presented in her portrait of Cordelia, the painting with an "odd title because Cordelia's whole face is visible. But, behind her hanging on the wall [...] is another face, covered with white cloth" (Atwood, 1988: 249).

The idea of showing the figure of artist on the painting (the face covered with white cloth) indicates that Elaine is familiar with the classical work of art – Jan van Eyck's painting entitled *The Arnolfini Marriage*.² Van Eyck's painting heralded the artist's departure from realism since it shows the figure of the artist in the pier glass who observes the main figures painted. The painting is signed, inscribed and dated on the wall above the convex mirror – *Johannes de eyck fuit hic 1434*³. The presence of Van Eyck's painting, the work of art from the real world, in the world of Atwood's fictional character illustrates the fusion of fictional and real entities in literature.

² The Flemish painter Jan van Eyck was one of the forerunners of the self-conscious artistic tradition that was revolutionary in Renaissance – Flemish art.

³ Jan van Eyck was here 1434.

According to Doležel, the works of real artists become part of fictional world by their transformation into individualized fictional objects (Doležel, 2008: 65). *The Arnolfini Marriage*, real as it may be, is transformed into a fictional object in Atwood's novel.

Elaine, the novel's heroine and a student of Art and Archeology "fascinated with the effect of glass, and of other light-reflecting surfaces" examines the pier glass depicted on Van Eyck's painting and becomes aware of the complexity of reflection (Atwood, 1988: 355). She defines the pier glass as a "magnifying glass" which reflects the figures of the Arnolfini couple "slightly askew, as if in a different law of gravity, a different arrangement of space exists inside" (Atwood, 1988: 355). The convex glass fascinates her because it "reflects in its convex surface not only [the Arnolfinis'] backs but also two other people who aren't in the main picture at all" (Atwood, 1988: 355). Elaine recognizes the power of the round mirror and compares it with an eye "that sees more than anyone else looking" (Atwood, 1988: 355).

Cat's eye, Elaine's "self-portrait, of some sorts" is another way of exploring Van Eyck's idea. The convex mirror depicted in the painting shows the artist's head "in the foreground, though it's shown only from the middle of the nose up: just the upper half of the nose" (Atwood, 1988: 446). The artist depicted in the painting simultaneously becomes the viewer and the viewed. Her reflection in the convex mirror shows "the back of [her] head" and the hair that is "different, younger" (Atwood, 1988: 446). The mirror in her painting functions as a magnifying glass that distorts her face in the foreground, revealing the complexity of her self-image. She looks young and old at the same time, as she observes in the beginning of the novel while gazing at her own self-image in the mirror.

THE CAT'S EYE MARBLE

Elaine's self-reflection as well as her artistic and subjective vision is also presented through the cat's eye marble. In the text "*Cat's Eye: Elaine Risley's Retrospective Art*", Howells emphasizes the importance of the cat's eye marble as a visual and imaginative symbol (Howells, 1994: 210). As a metaphor of an eye, the marble simultaneously helps Elaine create a different mode of seeing and gives her an alternative representation of the self. Her cat's eye marble is a real entity that helps her to become aware of the alternative ways of seeing in the early stages of her life. As a girl, she plays with marbles and expects to win the cat's eye, which is her favourite. Soon she starts carrying it in her pocket and when Cordelia asks about it, Elaine thinks: "She doesn't know what power this cat's eye has, to protect me. Sometimes when I have it with me I can see the way it sees" (Atwood, 1988: 157). Elaine describes her marble as "valuable as a jewel" and discovers its "impartial gaze" that provides an

alternative to the ordinary vision (Atwood, 1988: 172). She finds out that “[t]he cat’s eyes really are like eyes, but not the eyes of cats” because the marble also represents “eyes of something that isn’t known but exists anyway, like green eyes of the radio, like the eyes of aliens from a distant planet” (Atwood, 1988: 69).

Her reflections on the cat’s eye marble and its possible meanings are later on exploited in her art. This brings us back to Doležel’s theory and his insistence on distinguishing fictional entities from the real ones. The cat’s eye marble in Elaine’s fictional world (the world of her visions and works of art) cannot be a substitute for the real cat’s eye marble she once played with (real world). However, these two entities belonging to different worlds are interwoven, and only through their interconnectedness is she able to question the ordinary vision and come to terms with the complexity of subjectivity. As she transforms a real entity into a fictional one, Elaine realizes that, instead of one vision/self, there are always many visions/multiple selves.

THE THIRD EYE

The alternative way of seeing is also presented through the metaphor of the third eye. In this sense, the novel *The Cat’s Eye* is linked to the story entitled “Instructions for the Third Eye” from her collection of short stories *Murder in the Dark* (1983), in which the narrator defines the third eye through the distinction between vision and a possible vision: “The former relates to something it’s assumed you’ve seen the latter to something it’s assumed you haven’t” (Atwood, 2010: 112). The actual eyes are limited to a supposed truth (the thing one assumes to have seen), while the third eye “will show you that this truth is not the only truth” (Atwood, 2010: 113). This short story, thus, proposes alternative types of vision that best correspond to the artist’s third eye, which the cat’s eye marble stands for in the novel. Howells points out that the cat’s eye marble represents Elaine’s talisman in her childhood and as such already functions “beyond her consciousness as her Third Eye” (Howells, 1994: 211). At one point Elaine realizes that at the beginning of her career she used to paint things that were actually there, in front of her, but now with a visionary power of the marble, she is able to see further and thus “paint things that aren’t there” (Atwood, 1988: 366).

EYES ON THE PAINTINGS

Elaine’s works of art propose an alternative type of vision, since the motif of eyes is their recurrent element. These paintings depict the relation between the vision and visions in which “socially accepted codes of seeing are challenged by the eye of the artist” (Howells, 1994: 204). In the painting *Deadly Nightshade*, for instance, Elaine

paints several eyes. During her first art exhibition, Elaine is questioned: “what are all those eyes doing in it?” (Atwood, 1988: 383) Elaine does not answer the question, even though these many eyes seem to symbolize the several possible ways of seeing, contesting the existence of a single mode of perceiving the world.

Likewise, her painting *Unified Field Theory* also echoes the concern with many possible ways of seeing. Through the representation of her cat's eye marble, the protagonist emphasizes the power of visions, as her painting is a reference to an incident of her past. When she is a young girl, Elaine falls into a frozen ravine under a bridge but believes she is saved by the Virgin Mary. As it is never proved that young Elaine is really saved by the saint, the narrative seems to imply that she sees a sort of apparition, *a* vision, not *the* vision. In Elaine's reworking of this supposed apparition in *Unified Field Theory*, the saint holds “an oversized cat's eye marble” between her hands (Atwood, 1988: 447). Howells points out that the painting *Unified Field Theory* is a symbol of Elaine's “complex representation of vision” (Howells, 1994: 214). The painting shows the power of imaginary vision because it expresses the author's blend of *a* vision (an apparition in the form of Virgin Mary) and *the* vision (the artistic vision symbolically represented by the marble).

CONCLUSION

The heroine's urge for creating different universes is triggered by her brother's theories about time, space and vision and the possibility of existence in other worlds: “We are limited by our own sensory equipment... But actually we perceive four” (Atwood, 1988: 241–242). By understanding the limitations of her own senses, Elaine can activate the third eye – an artistic vision that helps her to reconstruct her memories, perceive the reality as fragmented and slippery and provide an escape from it. The reflective surfaces she exploits in her artworks enable her to create other worlds where the roles might be reversed, her traumatic past reconstructed and her multiple self properly dealt with.

Fictional and real entities in the form of reflective surfaces such as mirrors, eyes, marbles and water magnificently blend in Elaine's paintings and evoke her statement that “there is never only one of anyone”. They not only reveal the double nature of the writers and artists, symbolically presented in the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, but also point at the beauty of multiplicity expressed in alternative types of vision and multiple self. Our perception of the world is called in question through the power of imaginary vision that may arise as a result of our openness to the possibility of existence in other worlds. Only when the balance between fictional and real is achieved through her artworks is Elaine able to face her past embodied in the cat's eye marble she

finds in her old plastic purse in the cellar and “see [her] life entire” (Atwood, 1988: 434).

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МИЛЕНА З. НИКОЛИЋ

РЕФЛЕКТУЈУЋЕ ПОВРШИНЕ У *МАЧЈЕМ ОКУ* МАРГАРЕТ ЕТВУД

Резиме: Употреба рефлектујућих површина у уметности током шездесетих година прошлог века довела је до промене у начину на који аутори опајају субјективност. Рефлектујуће површине у уметности обично попримају облик огледала, очију, стакла или воде. Оне опомињу ауторе да треба да узму у обзир сопствену спознају кад је реч о уметности и дају назнаке о психолошком стању уметникове свести. Интересовање за различите начине на које се бројни видови рефлектујућих површина могу испољити у писању подстакло је Маргарет Етвуд да напише роман *Мачје око* (1988), у коме главну улогу има сликарка Илејн Ризли, која кроз експериментисање објектима који емитују одраз успева да се суочи са траумама из прошлости и пронађе свој уметнички израз. Иако је уметност нешто што у више наврата удаљава јунакињу од стварности и приближава је фантастичном свету визија и халуцинација, у коме увек постоји неколико верзија једног догађаја, или ако хоћемо, једне особе, она је истовремено водећи покретач промена у јунакињиној перспективи, које од ње изискују да се суочи са узнемирујућом прошлошћу и фрагментираним идентитетом. Уз осврт на теорију о могућим световима, који постоје паралелно са стварним светом, и идеју о нужном разграничавању фикционалних од стварних ентитета, настојали смо да кроз анализу рефлектујућих површина, којима Илејн експериментира кроз слике које ствара, идентификујемо шта је стварно, а шта фиктивно у јунакињином поимању стварности и укажемо на алтернативне начине виђења стварности, који произлазе из непрекидног суживота фиктивног и стварног у свету једног уметника.

Кључне речи: фикција, стварност, мачје око, огледало, одраз, уметност, слике.

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