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## **ERGODIC LITERATURE AS REPRESENTATIVE OF METAMODERN FICTION**

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**Abstract:** This essay aims to investigate two ergodic novels as a representation of literature after postmodernism. More specifically, it will address non-linear novels, extending beyond the boundaries of the text and becoming highly complex, as representative of a new phase, namely *metamodernity*. The examples taken into account are *House of Leaves* (2000) by Mark Z. Danielewski and *S. Ship of Theseus* (2013) by J.J. Abrams and D. Dorst.

**Keywords:** metamodernity, storytelling, ergodic literature, postmodern, complexity.

This article focuses on the techniques used by writers to de-structure the novel over the past twenty years. Such techniques are rooted in and often expand the strategies used in postmodern novels, thereby creating a new phase: metamodernity (Vittorini, *Metamodernismo* 201). In gaining complexity, contemporary narratives are reshaping literary subgenres; specifically, narratives are expanding beyond the text by progressing across multiple media simultaneously. This is poignantly true in the case of ergodic literature, which will be the focus of this study. Ergodic literature is an example of hypermodern storytelling. Initially the term was used almost exclusively to indicate cybernetic texts or literature expanding beyond the physical book, into electronic literature and virtual texts (Aarseth). Over time, the term has grown to include novels characterized by complex, non-linear structures, such as *House of Leaves* (2000) by M. Z. Danielewski, *The Raw Shark Texts* (2007) by S. Hall, *S. Ship of Theseus* (2013) by J.J. Abrams and D. Dorst, or *theMystery.doc*

(2020) by M. McIntosh. Ergodic literature includes unconventional narratives that reshape the traditional actantial model and extend the story beyond its conventional confines. Complexity thus becomes its new defining stylistic feature; this is exemplified through the alternation of linear narratives.

### **From Postmodernism to Metamodernism**

Many changes have had an impact on society and the arts since the 1960s. Italo Calvino stated, “many of the concepts we broach have changed over time, although we still call them by the same name (...) All the parameters, categories, antitheses used to classify and construct the world have been reshaped” (Calvino 352). This urges existing scholarship to reconsider interpretational categories: contemporary culture seems to collectively fall under the umbrella term of popular culture, in the amplest sense. Moving away from postmodernity, cultural products have become dynamically multiform.

New narrative patterns began emerging in the wake of metamodernity, as postmodernism witnessed the “disappearance of the confine separating high culture from popular culture, and the birth of a new type of novel” (Jameson 10). The studies that traced such changes attempted to differentiate among terms often used interchangeably, so as to account for their differences and create order in a system in perpetual flux precisely because of its constant evolution (Donnarumma 26).

Vittorini claimed that finding a name for the rising narrative forms would be difficult, since literary and video storytelling is always approached through few, vast categories such as modern, modernism, postmodern, and their myriad subcategories, each having its own spatiotemporal axes and its relatively specific epistemological and aesthetic characteristics (the suffix *real* becomes predominant) (Vittorini, *Narrativa* 11). This is confirmed by Franzini, who adds that the uncertain terminology is a sign that in such fields there are no unequivocal singular definitions: as a consequence, the terms *modern* and *modernity* (and their correlative post-) have been used as synonyms, in that they refer to the same conceptual frameworks and are unhinged from specific time periods. Modern and postmodern are *cultural* terms, in that they do not identify a specific time period, philosophical movement, or stable conceptual framework (Franzini 17).

As noted by Vittorini, once postmodernity is overtaken by the new frameworks of global, world literature, literary storytelling begins to use the centripetal strategies

which were already used by the modern novel, accentuating them with the centrifugal, de-structuring patterns typical of postmodern fiction, so as to develop a pendular motion between the naive and/or enthusiastic idealism of the former and the skeptical and/or apathetic pragmatism of the latter, thereby moving within a metamodern space (Vittorini, *Metamodernismo* 19). Complexity thus becomes the defining trait of contemporary literature. Cultural products born within such context necessarily embody these relevant theoretical shifts. In this light, the product's complexity is not exclusively linked to its final version but is rather an effect of the dynamics, which led to its composition, seen from a critical-methodological perspective. This process expands what was already the case for postmodern novels. The novels thus produced seem to belong to a complex framework, one that is absorbed by the narrative. Within such theoretical framework, this new form of modernity is hard to name. So much so, that Gibbons claims that: "There are many terms for this new supplanting cultural logic, this shift in the ruling belief system: to name a few – altermodernism, cosmmodernism, digimodernism, metamodernism, performatism, post-digital, post-humanism, and the clunky post-postmodernism. There are convergences and divergences between these conceptualizations; they complement each other as much as they compete" (Gibbons).

Novels typical of metamodernity, within which reality is both created and manipulated in both form and content by altered narrative fields, generate ramifications which bring forth a new, embryonic reality. The latter expands beyond its given limits. In this context, the hyper-tale becomes a modality used to overcome traditional storytelling by opting for a language open to novelty and to the expansion of what is possible (Vittorini, *Metamodernismo* 43). In light of such new trends in critical discourse, this essay will use the terms metamodern and hypermodern as fluid labels, so as to encompass in as ample terms as possible contemporary narrative frameworks, while absorbing the narratological issues raised by contemporary society.

The movement from modernity, through postmodernity, and to the present is characterized not only by a shift in mindsets and customs but, more poignantly, by a change in the media used to represent and analyze society. Hypermodern novels come undone, fragmenting and expanding the narrative, and thus yield unexpected outcomes. Storytelling in such novels becomes anchored to the idea of toying with a text's structural fabric, often exposing it and at times rendering its formation part of

the plot, bringing metanarrative (Vittorini, *Metamodernismo* 43) structures and voices to the forefront. The text expands beyond the fragmentations characteristic of postmodernism, branching out into extreme intertextuality.<sup>1</sup>

The novel does not rely on specific canonical paradigms. It is an open organism; it lives and is produced through its changes, absorbing within itself other literary genres (Benedetti 116). As a result, the novel becomes the genre through which to observe contemporary innovations in terms of narrative techniques (Bakhtin 446). Experimental novels with erratic structures portray an intermingling, the transformation that emerges from new, unexpected intersections (Rushdie 432), rising to become a token of contemporary literary phenomenology. Contemporary, globalized society allows for hybridization; literature thus becomes the object of fragmentation and intersections, yielding novels that portray such complexity in their structure.

### **Ergodic Literature as an Example of Narrative Complexity**

The novel becomes focal in metamodern storytelling especially in the last twenty years, which witness the triumph of hybrid visions and compositions, both vaguely structured and scientifically arranged (Krysinski 284). This is made explicit in irregular structures (consisting in hybridization, multiple plot lines, shifts in actantial models) which all give rise to and intermingle different narrative planes. Metamodern stories reflect the complex narratology which is central to contemporary culture and which stems from the evolution of media. The emergence of new media has imposed a reconceptualization of the novel in keeping with ideas of remediation as framed by Bolter and Grusin. The latter define modernity as the time of convergence<sup>2</sup> during which interpreting new media movements is challenging on a theoretical plane because the processes of convergence seem to be overwhelming the capacity to define individual components in the media system analytically and to conceptualize these in a cohesive manner (Bolter, Grusin 20-51). In this light, visual communication has become part of narrative storytelling, as is the case for ergodic novels; the latter use a language rich in iconic forms, which are fixed in collective memory, combined syntactically into units of meaning, and a new grammar which

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<sup>1</sup> To gain an overview of what happens with the advent of metamodernism in its different forms (from autofiction to satire) see Van Den Akker et. al. 2017.

<sup>2</sup> For an exhaustive exploration of convergence in the context of new media, see Jenkins 2014.

controls the sequencing of images in coherent macro-expressions (Conti 79). This is also a result of the fact that, being challenged by new technologies, traditional media are attempting to undergo a remediation, so as to reaffirm their role within contemporary culture (Bolter, Grusin 5). Therefore, immediacy and hypermediation are added to the known categories of convergence and remediation to redefine existing media<sup>3</sup>.

In light of such changes, the metamodern story becomes a radiating center at the heart of the mediasphere which generates it and which it, in turn, regenerates, in a web of intermedial relationships, that can appear as transpositions, combinations, or references (Vittorini, *Metamodernismo* 201). Metamodernity makes novels that imitate the form of the novel (Barth 56), while simultaneously remediating the novel, expanding it beyond the spaces it is traditionally assigned, including physical ones. Such is the case with the new literary subgenre known as ergodic literature (the name comes from Attic Greek, *érgon* [work] and *hodós* [passage]). Coined in 1997 by Espen J. Aarseth in the article *Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, it addresses all texts so complex as to extend beyond the limitations of a book, moving on multiple parallel levels. One of the primary characteristics of such texts is that they can be read unicursally or multicursally (Aarseth 8); in either case, the reader makes an effort to engage with the multilayered text. Initially, such literary subgenre indicated almost exclusively cybernetic texts; literature that extended to spaces beyond the book, such as electronic literature or virtual texts (Aarseth 17-18). More recently, the term has been used to define novels that are characterized by a complex, non-linear structures. In some cases, these predate Aarseth's article.

The crucial point is that contemporary novels no longer abide by rules (Richardson 13-36) and are, in this respect, difficult to define according to specific characteristics as the definitions are constantly being adjusted<sup>4</sup> in response to

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<sup>3</sup> As Bolter and Grusin stated, if the idea of immediacy results in effacing or automatizing representation, hypermediation recognizes the existence of multiple representations and makes these visible. Where immediacy suggests a single, unified visual space, hypermediation offers a heterogeneous space, within which representation is considered not as a single window on the world, but rather as multiple windows, opening on further representations or other media. The idea of hypermediation multiplies the signs of mediation and thus tries to reproduce the sensory wealth of the human experience. On the other hand, hypermediation can work within a single, apparently unified medium, especially when the illusion of realism is exploited beyond all limitations and brought to its extreme consequences (Bolter, Grusin 33-34).

<sup>4</sup> In this light, the work developed by Narrative Research Lab dell'Aarhus University in terms of the *Dictionary of Unnatural Narratology*, is particularly interesting. It can be found here:

metamodernity's centripetal forces: "Many of the proffered definitions are perfectly adequate for garden-variety narratives, but they run into trouble when we begin to approach unusual, minimal, or borderline narratives" (Richardson 13). Ergodic literature and contemporary novels both bring to the forefront a narrative complexity which pushes the story beyond the limitations of traditional texts, even in the most basic, material terms. Such narratives merge different fields and expand writing beyond its traditional scope. The reader has to take an active role in complex semiotic operations and shifts in order to enjoy the text in its fullness. Ergodic texts can demand simple physical tasks, such as turning the text around repeatedly, or more complex tasks, such as operating across different fields simultaneously. The latter is especially true in the case of hypertexts. Novels thus defined usually include a linear text which is coupled with a more irregular and challenging text from which the multilayered narratives stem. The reader is invited to take part in the creative process by trying, ideally, to pursue all the layers of the narrative. The author composes a multilayered complex narrative and the reader follows its different paths; this is further enhanced in moving from cybernetic literature to ergodic analogical literature. The reader can always choose not to follow the paths created or to do so only in part. In this respect, this type of text offers different types of fruition and different levels of complexity, which will depend upon the reader's choices. Within such texts, plots and storylines are completely reinterpreted so as to generate a nonlinear evolution of the story. The latter relies upon reader's direct involvement in following the paths traced in the footnotes, parallel plots, or counterplots.<sup>5</sup> The limits of the signifier are thus overcome, involving the reader in an utterly new manner (Peel 74-75).

In light of the elements presented thus far, ergodic novels emerge as a clear tool through which one might explore metamodernity. Such novels exemplify the

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<https://projects.au.dk/en/narrativeresearchlab/unnaturalnarratology/dictionaryofunnaturalnarratology/>

<sup>5</sup> According to Aarseth an ergodic text consists in *textons* e *scriptons*, that are necessary to approach the work analytically: "scriptons are what an «ideal reader» reads by strictly following the linear structure of the textual output." (Aarseth 62). By extending such definition beyond cybernetic texts, one can claim that a text consists in *scriptons*, which are in turn formed by *textons*. The order and meaning of all the possible sequences and combinations of these is potentially infinite. Aarseth differentiates such elements from *lexia*. *Unlike the latter, scriptons* are not necessarily identical to what the reader can read, because they are determined by a combination of *textons* (Mukherjee 65-79). If *scriptons* are strings of text as they appear to the reader and *textons* are strings as they exist within the text, it is the transversal function to matter; that is, the way the former are uncovered or generated by the latter.

way the new novel exposes the mechanisms constructing the text. The linearity of the plot is thus sacrificed in favor of the presence of multilayered narratives, which in turn become the new defining trait in contemporary narratives.

### **Examples of Metamodern Ergodic Literature: Between *House of Leaves* (2000) and *S. Ship of Theseus* (2013)**

The second part of this article will investigate two ergodic novels, as fitting examples of what has been explored theoretically. These will be used to identify salient traits and thereby attempt to trace the metamodern framework present in these types of texts. *House of Leaves* (2000) is an early example, while *S. Ship of Theseus* (2013) is a more recent and more complex text.

The first novel under examination, *House of Leaves* (2000) by Mark Z. Danielewski, has been unanimously recognized as the first ergodic text in the full sense of the term. The plot is rendered complex due to the use of multiple narrators, which constantly shift the point of view. The plot seemingly revolves around Johnny Truant's discovery of a manuscript entitled *The Navidson Record* by Zampanò: the manuscript tells the mysterious story of a documentary film about a house, Pulitzer prize winner Navidson, and his family. The story's multiple layers include: Truant's discovery of the manuscript; the manuscript itself; and Navidson's documentary. The reader is invited to question the mystery surrounding Ash Tree Lane as the focal point for all the subplots. The novel's main idea is the overlapping nature of reality and truth (Travers 65-76); the dichotomy between the two is amplified in metamodern times. The idea is that what is real is not necessarily true and viceversa, to the point that human beings are conceived as linguistic constructs (Belville 48); this alters the actantial patterns in the text significantly. A further metamodern aspect in the novel is the inclusion of the author's own reflections on nothing and on its role within literature through the characters' voices, Truant's specifically. The house becomes a symbol of absence (Slocombe 89-92): it is a space that is abandoned and not a place to which to return. Absence becomes absolute as it is the absence of everything: people, spatial and mental reference points, stable identity. The novel begins as a *thriller*;<sup>6</sup> however, it defies the genre as it evolves. This is

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<sup>6</sup> In this light, the evolution of the detective story or thriller could be evaluated against the tricolon of truth, reality, and absence, in view of the way emerging media are changing the genre and modulating it through transmediality (see: Mondello 65-89).

typical of ergodic literature, which tends to merge genres, escaping traditional tropes and classifications.

The novel is compounded by two further elements: the author's desire to involve the reader, also typical of ergodic literature, and his desire to affirm the novel as a newly dominant medium (Hansen 597), specifically in its hypermediality.<sup>7</sup> In this light, a large part of the novel is taken up by visual reproductions; “a large portion of the discourse in *House of Leaves* consists in the verbal representation of a fictitious film titled *The Navidson Record*. To signify this particular subtype of intermedial reference, I have suggested the neologism *kinekphrasis*, by which I mean the verbal representation of cinema or another form of moving image” (Kilpiö 65). The book appears as a digital text and is thus able to embolden and address the connections between itself and the artifacts and images held within it (Kilpiö 67). On the one hand, the novel *House of Leaves* simulates and reflects on different the media included in its many layers,<sup>8</sup> while on the other it empowers the book as a medium by embodying its extensive potential. This latter trait seems to be a founding trait of metamodernity: the novel develops a metaliterary reflection on its own nature and on the new opportunities offered to it by emerging media. Through the fluidity of movement among narratives, the story can remediate itself, absorbing different forms of representation: the book transforms into an innovative tool, capable of connecting with the reader in a more involved and deep manner than in the past.

In the second case, that of *S. Ship of Theseus* (2013), the main idea was partly inspired by Adams finding a book left on a bench in an airport. The book included a note inviting the finder to read it and then leave it somewhere else, where it might be picked up and read by another (Du Chateau). It was also inspired by Dorst's response to the controversial case of Shakespearean attribution studies<sup>9</sup> and to the case of B. Traven.<sup>10</sup> *S. Ship of Theseus* reads as a novel written in 1949 borrowed from the

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<sup>7</sup> For a more exhaustive analysis of the question of media, see Hansen 2004 (“Given the novel's obsession with media and mediation, it is hardly surprising that the first of these mediations is a film, *The Navidson Record*, compiled by Pulitzer Prize winning photojournalist Will Navidson from videos made by himself, his wife Karen Green, and several of the characters involved in exploring the new house they moved into in order to begin afresh the curious, “warped” house on Ash Tree Lane that turns out to be larger on the inside than on the outside”, 599).

<sup>8</sup> In this light, the novel's complex graphic structure is central, specifically in terms of its layout, which includes different types of images portrayed through the different narrative styles.

<sup>9</sup> An explicit allusion to Shakespeare's identity is included in the novel: Abrams, Dorst VIII.

<sup>10</sup> Pseudonym for a twentieth century author who used it to dissemble his identity. See, Hauschild 2012.



Pollard State University library in New England<sup>11</sup> and never returned. It includes annotations made by different readers, a great number of memorabilia, official documents, color and black-and-white photographs, pages from newspapers and birthday cards. In this case, as is the case in *House of Leaves* and in most ergodic novels, the work becomes an object, a collectible, due to its specific editorial form. The different elements are included in specific moments of the text so as to contribute to generate the three narrative layers in story: the reading of the linear novel *Ship of Theseus*, apparently written by W. Straka; the notes of F.X. Caldeira, the translator; and the third, more complex layer developed through the marginalia written by Eric and Jen. Eric is a doctoral student, in a diatribe with his supervisor, Prof. Moody, who allegedly appropriated his research. Jen is a student who is helping Eric in his research, specifically in terms of Straka's authorship.

Other than the many narrative threads which intersect within the work, the novel's publication was compounded by the emergence of a series accounts on social media. Twitter profiles emerged for Jen Heyward and Eric Husch, both run anonymously, without an explicit authorization, publishing spoilers and clues regarding the novel's unfolding.<sup>12</sup> A Twitter profile, using the name of the author Straka,<sup>13</sup> was created in November 2013; and a personal blog by Jen emerged on Tumblr.<sup>14</sup> The latter contains Straka's first draft of chapter ten, before this was edited by Caldeira.<sup>15</sup> The accounts on Twitter and Tumblr are not the only extension of the novel into the real world, blurring the line between truth and reality. There is also a false review of the novel *S. Ship of Theseus*, cited in both Dorst's Twitter feed and Jen's blog, which was allegedly published in *McKay's Magazine* in February 1950.<sup>16</sup> Further, an audio recording of Summersby's confession was published anonymously on Youtube,<sup>17</sup> expanding both the boundaries of the narrative and its meaning with its transmedial presence.

As is immediately evident, the novel's unstructured form reflects the characteristics of ergodic literature; it is metamodern in extending beyond the

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<sup>11</sup> The library tag is on the book's spine.

<sup>12</sup> The two profiles can be found here: <https://twitter.com/JenTheUndergrad> and <https://twitter.com/EricHusch>.

<sup>13</sup> The profile can be accessed here: <https://twitter.com/vmstraka>.

<sup>14</sup> The profile can be accessed here: <https://jenheyward.tumblr.com/>.

<sup>15</sup> It will be revealed that Caldeira is Filomena, a woman in love with Straka.

<sup>16</sup> The review can be accessed here: <http://sfiles22.blogspot.com/2013/12/mckays-magazine-review-ship-of-theseus.html>.

<sup>17</sup> The profile can be accessed here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_L-THM1VxHE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_L-THM1VxHE).

boundaries of the physical text; exploring different multilayered narrative threads; and using new media, including social media. The presence of multiple narrative voices, as was the case for *House of Leaves*, expands the novel further. The tale is told by: Vaclav Straka, who is a young worker born in the south of Bohemia in 1892 and to whom the story may be dedicated; Jen, a student who has run away from home; Eric, a doctoral student whose real name is Nicodemus John, a name he changed following severe tensions with his family; the evil professor Moody; the translator, Caldeira, who is actually Filomena; and, finally, the author. The novel's progression across multiple levels also allows for a complex and continuous shift in actantial patterns, which in turn leads to the narrative threads shifting axes. The focus of all such layers remains the search for the author; this begins in the novel's early pages. Interestingly, the names Straka and Caldeira appear on the page preceding the *Translator's Notes* and the *Foreword*, under the title, *Copyright*. This enhances the veracity of the novel, creating an author and a translator for it. The author's identity is thus central from the very opening. The relationship between the translator and the author immediately comes into focus as potentially problematic, placing the translator as a co-author (Buffagni), an issue that has been addressed in critical discourse when the translator actively contributes to the text. This aspect is not resolved within the novel, but Caldeira's strong and at times overbearing presence makes the question evident.

Following the name on the opening page, other elements contribute to the creation of the author's character: a list of eighteen works published by Straka; annotations indicating all the different times the book was checked out; and Hemingway's alleged admiration for the author, expressed in a 1935-interview with *Le Monde* and his subsequent dismissal of him once upon being denied private interview (Abrams, Dorst VI). The quantity of information given serves both to expand the narrative fields and to create an image of the author Eric and Jen are seeking. Further, the two true authors of the novel, Abrams and Dorst, seem to use the text to investigate the metaliterary questions they are most invested in and which primarily constitute the narrative. The question of the true author; the actantial model; the unnatural or fragmented storytelling enhanced through the use of different media. In this light, the first document included in the text becomes salient (Abrams, Dorst 6-7); it is a secret document belonging to Uppsala University consisting of a letter from Straka to Mr Grahn dated August 17, 1928, which

addresses the possibility of producing film versions of Straka's works. The letter addresses the film version of the author's fifth novel, *Satan's March* in particular. In it, Straka claims that he is not in favor of transmediality, ironically criticizing the very structure of the novel of which he is a part. "Consenting alterations or deviations of the work is immoral" (Abrams, Dorst 6-7) he quips. The games the text plays with its audience remain captivating, shifting, as they do, the focus of the questions raised. The text's transmediality is critiqued precisely while it is created. In conclusion, ergodic novels emerging in the first ten years of the new millennium seem to offer a privileged viewpoint into metamodern literature, especially in relation to the fluidity of a specific genre; the presence of multiple layers that intersect and overlap within the text; the interference of different agents and the need for the reader's strong inferential participation.

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