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Echoes of The Pandemic in Postmodern Esthetic Communication

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Abstract: The paper analyses how some types of postmodern art have been used as a means of copying by the aid of humour with the unpleasant restrictions and changes of the way of life during the emergency and alert states in Romania. Artă Reinterpretată is a Facebook page that offers posts on various aspects of life during the pandemics quarantine and lockdown, including isolation or exploiting love, couple and family difficulties; during the relaxation measurement and, finally, during rights restriction for those whom do not have The Green Covid Card. It does so by reinterpreting classical paintings, by adding to them a text or an image or both and thus creating a humourist situation meant to ease upon the hardships of a situation we cannot change.

Keywords: *postmodern, aesthetics, humour, therapy, pandemic restrictions.*

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1. The positive effects of humour

When Wittgenstein affirms that "Humour is not a mood only, but a way of looking at the world" (1980, p.171), we can understand that humour may be an important state of mind, a way of understanding the world. Humour is about human relationships, as well, and, if people do not have the same sense of humour, they do not react properly to each other." (Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 181). Humour may be considered something serious, in the opinion of T. S. Elliot, for whom humour is a way of saying something serious. Moreover, humour may be used as a weapon by the unarmed people, helping the oppressed smile at the situation that pains them, as Simon Wiesenthal argues. For Erich Kastner, humour is the umbrella under which the wise take shelter from the rain. All of these opinions suggest on one side that humour is not to be taken lightly or reduced to mere entertainment, and on the other side, that it is something wise (philosophical), serios about humour that can be very helpful and protective.

According to psychologist Mihaela Marinas, humor is our sixth sense: "We must use our sixth sense: the sense of humor. Humour is not only about telling jokes, but a way to look at life. We can laugh at our mistakes and sufferance. And we can be honest about our life, without taking it too seriously." This means that there is something serious about taking things lightly. Among its benefic consequences, the author mentions that "Humor is the balance in the moments that we experience difficulties" and "The sense of humor helps accepting the inevitable, dealing with challenges and coming out of every situation with a smile" (Marinas, 2021)

For these reasons, a form of therapy through laughter appeared in the moment when Norman Cousins published an article in 1976 in The English Medical Journal. The author realized that if negative thoughts and a negative attitude may lead to illness, the positive attitude may have the contrary effect. Further research showed that laughter strengthens the immunity system and is a pain reliever.

The practice of humour is thus a way of maintaining a good state of mind and body. We believe that the same applies at a social scale, humour may be a way of keeping a social equilibrium in times of difficulty.

2. Postmodern art and humour

It is not unusual that postmodern art reinterprets the classical works of art in a humourist way. The perfect example is the famous portrait of Mona Lisa – Gioconda, to which Salvador Dali added moustaches. A postmodern

reaction to the classical paradigm of art, the humourist gesture opened new artistic horizons. "A true artist is not one who is inspired, but one who inspires" is a notorious quote from Dali. On his steps followed today many postmodern artists, adapting his gesture to the current pandemic context, by placing Van Gogh – the famous painter that cut off his ear – in the amusing situation of a mask hanged on a single ear. The artists also added a mask to the famous Mona Lisa, a gesture that we find to be symbolic, a continuation of Dali's postmodern tradition adapted to the pandemic.

About the Romanian people, professor and art critique Petru Bejan (2014) wonders if: "Are we, the Romanians, insensitive to laughter? I would not say. In the difficult moments, humour and irony have proven salvatory. Romanians have made – and still make – "fun of trouble"[1]. They practice a "black humour", mixt. Even if the times we live appear to be… a joke, the man on the street is as we see him daily – sad, thoughtful, pessimistic" (Bejan, 2014, p. 130).

Even though on the streets people's concerns are obvious, on the social networks we may easily notice that Romanians love following and sharing humour pages, especially black humour. What is the situation in Romania? Surely the aesthetic humour as a pandemic vision is common to Romania, as well. In the period of the emergency state in 2020, as well as the periods of alert state that followed, in Romania humour was used as a way to cope with the restrictions and social changes, and, during the Covid Green Card, with the segregation.

3. Artă Reinterpretată's humourist postmodern art posts

An example of black humour trough postmodern aesthetics as a Romanian strategy to cope with the pandemic is "Artă Reinterpretată"[2], a social network Facebook page with almost 47 thousand followers and a simple description: "On this page you will find classic art reinterpreted in a humourist manner". Its profile picture is a crop of Da Vinci's Mona Lisa (Artă Reinterpretată, 2018). The page also posted a postmodern Mona Lisa with a mask, as an icon of pandemic changes following Dali (Artă Reinterpretată, 2020a).

By selecting classic paintings and reinterpreting them in a postmodern way (adding text or images or both to the picture) Artă reinterpretată uses those paintings to produce humour about different

[1] In Romania the expression is "a face haz de necaz".
[2] In translation, Reinterpreted Art.

situations. For the purpose of this article, we selected some of the works related to the pandemics.

First of all, we discuss what is a humourist solution offered to the situation of the pandemic by reinterpreting "Meditation" by Charles Arnable Lenoir (Artă Reinterpretată, 2020b). In the painting, a young woman dressed in white is sitting near a fountain with a meditative look, maybe wishful thinking, one hand under her chin. The reinterpretation was made by adding the text: "Maybe if we fall in love with The Coronavirus, he, too, will leave us" as if this was what the woman was telling herself. The humour exploits two difficult situations: on one side, the coronavirus, here to stay, and being left by the loved one, constantly, on the other. Both of these situations are hard to deal with, but combining the two brings humour in the pandemic situation.

A series of posts are related to the effects of isolation during quarantine lockdown. Some of these effects were negative psychic states such as depression, anxiety, loss of libido etc. For instance, the work "Boy swing" by John Donaghy is reinterpreted by Artă Reinterpretată (2020c) by adding text. In the original picture, we see a boy swinging inside the house, smiling to a woman who could portray his mother whom is sitting on a chair looking dreamy at him and smiling. The added text is an imaginary dialogue between the two. The woman says: "You are depressive because you are indoors all day long". The child replies with the question: "May I go outside?" and the woman replies a simple "No". This is a daily situation that parents with small children could relate to during the quarantine.

Another such post is the work "Pierre and Betty Leyris" by Balthus (Artă Reinterpretată, 2020d) in which the couple is at home and while he is smoking, she is playing very close to his head. The reinterpretation was made by adding the title: "Day Five of Staying at Home", suggesting thus the extent the boredom can get to, making adults play. The effects of isolation on the couple also show in the reinterpretation of "Woman at the café" by Antonio Donghi (Artă Reinterpretată, 2020e) with the same technique of giving it a new humourist title: "When you have a date with baby in the kitchen but he is late. He's at the bathroom, arranging his hair". Thus, the woman standing alone, in silence, becomes the icon of all women deprived of romance although part of a couple, in isolation.

On the fist of May, Romanians celebrate Labor's Day, and, by tradition, most gather among friends to barbecue outdoors, in nature. The reinterpretation of the painting "A game of Chess" by George Goodwin (Artă reinterpretată, 2020f), where a couple seems preoccupied by the game board, was made by adding to the painting a barbecue image and reentitlying it "1st of

May 2020". This suggest that Romanian couples must stay indoors and do a mental activity, chess, that suggest physical inactivity, and bring the barbecue inside.

There were many family problems, such as a greater divorce rate or an increase in domestic violence during the pandemics restrictions, and the reinterpretation of Jean Steen's "Couple in a Bedroom" by Artă Reinterpretată (2020g) draws it's black humour from these dramatic effects of isolation by reentitlying it with a paraphrase of a famous Romanian novel, "The Last Night of Love, The first Night of Quarantine".[3] The problem of breaking of couples is also present in Eduard Hopper's "Summer in the city", (Artă Reinterpretată, 2020h). This artwork was reentitled "When You Are Quarantined with Your Future X Lover", which suggest that breakup is not far away once quarantine is inforced.

The work we analyse next humours the effects social distance has upon the romantic relations which largely interacted on social media during the pandemic. "Planning The Grand Tour" by Brack Emil (Artă reinterpretată, 2020i) show a man standing with an elbow on a piano and a woman sitting on a chair, looking away from the man and smiling. The reinterpretation was made by adding a dialogue between them. The man asks "When can I see you again?" and the woman replies "Daily, on Instagram". Another work that draws its humour from the social distancing is the reinterpretation of Gerard ter Borch's "Woman Writing a Letter" (Artă Reinterpretată, 2020j).

During the lockdown period it was possible to offer assistance to children or elders. The reinterpretation in this case was made by adding the title "When you go to Baby" and the text "4) the assistance of elderly people" as if the woman was writing it on the declaration required to have upon to justify exiting your house. The humour marks both the requirement of a declaration as it does the age difference between the young woman and her lover.

The pandemics also affected the learning process which went online (for those children that had the possibility to attend school online). Artă Reinterpretată chooses the work by Edvard Munch entitled "Spring" (Artă Reinterpretată, 2020k) which portrays two women, a younger one and an elderly one doing hand work while looking at the window, to which it adds a new title "Online School" and a picture with a Netflix TV in front of them, suggesting thus that school online was an opportunity for children not to learn, as it unfortunately happened in many situations for different reasons.

[3] The novel is "The Last Night of Romance, The First Night of war" by CamilPetrescu.

After the lockdown, schools reopened and thus we have our next work by Jan Frederik Pieter Portielje (unknown title) reinterpreted by Artă Reinterpretată (2020l). In this painting, a young woman that could portrait a mother with a book in her hand and a child that could portray her daughter reading, a dialogue was added between them. The mother asks her daughter "How was the first week of school?" and the child replies: "The fist one? You mean that I have to go again?".

The same nostalgic after getting used to staying at home is humoured in the painting "Idle hours" by Joseph Caraud, portraying a young woman relaxed in a day chair with her cat playing with a bundle, a cosy domestic high life picture (Artă Reinterpretată, 2020m) by adding the title "The First Day after The Emergency State" and the line "Inside is still better", thus humouring the complaints people had against quarantine that in some ways they got used to.

The waiting of the relaxation orders was humoured with the help of "A lazy afternoon" painting by Gustave Léonard de Jonghe (Artă Reinterpretată, 2020n), in which a young woman is sitting on a bench in the park with a meditative look, a book and a sun umbrella, her dog lying by her side on the alee reentitled "Waiting for the terraces to open".

After the relaxation orders we have a beautiful reinterpretation of "God The Father" painted by Cima da Cogleniano (Artă Reinterpretată, 2nd of June 2020o) I which God widely opens His arms and says "Have the terraces opened? Let it be rain!", humouring that people cannot enjoy themselves because of the bad weather. A similar interpretation is put to use with the text "I will open the terraces and then the rain comes!" (Artă Reinterpretată, 2021b).

The "Australian beach pattern" by Charles Meere which depicts an over crowed beach was reentitled "Social Distancing on The Beach" humouring the defiance of social distance rules (Artă Reinterpretată, 2020p).

The wearing of the mask was long time a necessity indoors and outdoors. The page humours its negative effects on socialising by choosing to reinterpret "The Jewelry Box" by Jan Frederik Pieter (Artă Reinterpretată, 2020q), a painting in which a woman that could be a mother talks to a girl who could be her daughter. The girl askes her mother: "Mother, who is my father?" and her mother answers "I do not know, my dear. He was wearing a mask."

But maybe the most eloquent social absurd embarrassment takes on the ripping of the mask. In "Guarding the flower basket" by Karl Witkowski we see a little boy in the thinker position near a flower basket he may be

selling. The paining was reinterpreted by adding the line "Did the ripping of the mask and remaining with a necked face ever happened to you?" thus humouring the unpleasant situation of mask breaking in public (Artă Reinterpretată, 2020r). This situation resembles that of Van Gogh's masked one ear painting.

As the pandemics continue, the page currently posts about the mandatory vaccination. Reinterpreting Carl Heinrich Bloch's painting "In a Roman Osteria" of happy people dinning, by adding the line: "They could have been us" the attention falls on the segregation between vaccinated and non vaccinated in matter of rights during the forth wave of Romanian pandemic, in which The Green Card was necessary to be allowed entrance in a restaurant. (Artă Reinterpretată, 2020s).

These are not all the post related with the pandemic and we noticed that some of these classic paintings were reinterpreted in different ways for different other situations that do not make the subject of the present paper.

3. Conclusions

The analysed postproduction works of art are placed in the postmodern aesthetics of valorising the difficult pandemic situations through a humourist vision. Aesthetic humour in the manner of postmodernism has proven useful as a laughter therapy, as well as a social therapy in these times of great social difficulties.

Presenting the works of Artă Reinterpretată's Facebook Page created specially for the pandemic state prevention measures shows that for almost 47 thousand followers it was possible to bring a smile on their face during these hard times.

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