

The metaphor of kitsch in Caragiale's work. A Stormy Night & Company at "Tudor Vianu" Theatre Giurgiu

Cristi AVRAM*

Abstract: Kitsch, this aesthetic category developed in the second half of the 20th century, was one of Caragiale's points of interest, describing through it the shabby and ambitious world of a state that wanted at all costs to align itself with its Western European models. Surprised in various forms, kitsch can be found in the substratum of Caragiale's literature, underlined scenically by the performance of *A Stormy Night & Company* at the "Tudor Vianu" Theatre in Giurgiu, which serves as an argument. Moreover, kitsch can become an epithet attributed to man, easily found in the theatre proposed for analysis.

Keywords: Ion Luca Caragiale, theatre directing, *A Stormy Night*, adaptation, metaphor, kitsch

There is no doubt that in Caragiale's texts we meet grotesque faces, carnival figures, burlesque characters who find themselves in situations bordering on the absurd because of the embarrassments they themselves cause, or perhaps they facilitate the indifference and the lehamytis of others. Going into detail, we see that the people portrayed are looking for a way *to become, to be*, taking upon themselves an opaque and unknown ideal. For them, the lofty goal is a chimera that they are seduced by without much doubt. It can be seen, therefore, that the substance of the proposed projects is transparent, *it is completely lacking*. In the absence of content, one can speak of the gratuitousness, which becomes eccentric, of their actions, of their useless, infernally useless wanderings. Their desires imitate other people's programmes which, whether or not they are convergent and assimilable, whether or not they fit their inner structure, must take the form they propose.

So, imitation without a sense of responsibility is the credo of most of Caragiale's heroes, products of a state that unsuccessfully mimics European methods in order to align itself with the great cultures from which it draws

* Cristi AVRAM - theater and opera director, university assistant at UNAGE Iași, Faculty of Theater - Directing and assistant director at the Romanian National Opera House Iași.

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inspiration. The Caragialian character stubbornly assimilates everything that turns him into the mirror of the valuable man of his time. Ștefan Cazimir notes in *Ion Luca Caragiale versus kitsch* that: "The writer's work as a whole, without losing sight of its publicity component, is a vast study dedicated to the phenomenon of kitsch, its causes, forms and manifestations. All Caragiale lacked was the use of the term itself, but this, as we know, did not exist in his time. Instead, the writer anticipated it with a suggestive and effective synonym, taken from the current language of the time: the word *moft* / (*english*) *fad*, which comes from the Turkish language, where it means free or cheap."¹

In our country's theatrical literature, the *kitsch-man* is anticipated by Vasile Alecsandri's emblematic character - Chirița - who, in addition to all the grotesque traits that she sums up, wants to be a *fashionable woman*, as she can be seen on the great Parisian boulevards. The French chimeras are the silhouettes towards which the Romanian who accepts that he is in the eastern periphery of Europe, where the echoes of modernity are spreading with difficulty, directs his gaze. Thus, only in the hands of visionaries lies the fate of the nation, saved by the ambitions of those who want to move forward into the future. In the work of the slum dramatist too, figures like the one mentioned can be seen with great ease.

Caragiale's Romanian admires the great societies and copies them without style, but it is not the epigonism that turns him into a caricature that is the most serious problem, but the obstinacy with which he tries to drag others towards progress. Outraged, he seeks to force on those anchored in the past that "waiting quietly for the time when he too will give European culture and civilisation his own specific contribution"² is not the right solution for lifting himself out of the morass in which he is languishing. The present can be changed, and with it the fate of all mankind. It can be seen that beyond the ambitious programme Caragiale's character contains the grandiloquence of the importance he plays in the great context of change. However, it seems that for Caragiale's Romanian the way progress is achieved is insignificant, which makes it ridiculous.

¹ Ștefan Cazimir, *Ion Luca Caragiale față cu kitsch-ul*, Editura Cartea Românească, București, 1988, p. 20.

² A letter send by Caragiale to Alexandru Vlahuță. Look at Ion Luca Caragiale, *Despre lume, artă și neamul românesc*, Editura Humanitas, București, 1994.

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What interests us in this article is the way that Caragiale portrays the *kitsch-man* and, especially, how he is reflected in the performance *A Stormy Night & Company* that we performed in March 2024 at the "Tudor Vianu" Theatre in Giurgiu. Following Ștefan Cazimir's argumentation, it is necessary to point out that one of the characteristics of the *kitsch-man* is the *indispensability of opinions*: "The Caragiale's character learns from the gazette what the sovereign thinks and can appreciate that he himself thinks more accurately. It is therefore his duty to communicate his opinion publicly. A peculiarity of the *kitsch-man*, captured even by Caragiale, is the irrepressible need to express opinions on any matter, regardless of the degree of personal training in the matter. It is what the writer called, synthetically, the *obligatory nature of opinions*, and thus entitled a tasty essay, in the conclusion of which he noted emphatically: «I worship the sacred principle of the freedom of opinions, but I cannot in the least admit their obligatory nature.»³

But how can opinion be an argument that proves that this is how man becomes kitsch? As long as *to give an opinion* is to give one's opinion without any basis, without even knowing the problem about which one apparently knows a lot of details, the verb becomes the transposition into the outside of a non-existent background. If we go through most of the dialogues that take place in the pub, especially in Caragiale's sketches, we can see that the Romanian is an "encyclopedic spirit."⁴

In the prose *The Situation* (1901), which serves as the basis for the preambular dialogue of Act 1 of *A Stormy Night & Company*, Nae Ipingescu and Chiriac, borrowing a dialogue of two other friends from Caragiale's literature, discuss politics. In fact, political issues are the order of the day, as are *the cures* for the ministerial crisis that ordinary citizens have. Gleaned from articles, hearsay or made up on the spot, the characters' kitsch opinions are both serious and ridiculous. Criticizing the shortcomings of society, the characters also borrow attitudes, foreign words that they misappropriate, throb at truisms with apparent resonance in the good world.

Another example is the famous scene of the reading of the newspaper, analysed in detail in Ioana Pârvulescu's work - *The World as Newspaper. The*

³ Ștefan Cazimir, *Ion Luca Caragiale față cu kitsch-ul*, ed. cit., p. 66.

⁴ Apud Ștefan Cazimir, *Ion Luca Caragiale față cu kitsch-ul*, ed. cit., p. 67.

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*fourth power: Caragiale.*⁵ This is good evidence of the appropriation of a cryptic message for the not-so-subtle interpretations of Nae Ipingscu and Jupân Dumitrache. Knowing that Rică Venturiano's article combats a problem, their understanding of it is an unmistakable fact, the two adhering without much question to the frontier position the publicist adopts. The lack of knowledge of neologisms, of political attitude are insignificant details, as long as the meaning is understood in depth. In the show we performed at the Giurgiu Theatre, the scene of reading the newspaper is not only the opaque deciphering of the article by the two confidants - Jupân Dumitrache and Nae Ipingscu - but also involves the community - the collective character - equally obtuse to the message conveyed by the author of the newspaper. Read on the toilet and to the rhythms of local folklore, the scene of the gazette lends the silhouette of a pamphlet. In fact, every time when the Romanian in our show is confronted with a reading, the chords of local folklore return hauntingly. Zița too, runs through the lines of the letter sent by Rică to the same tune, understanding the poem and the French as well as the two men understand her article.

Another characteristic of the *kitsch-man* is his attitude towards the accepted habits of good taste of the society of the time, habits that become fads, pamperings, fads. Just as Alecsandri's hunchback Chirița imitates Parisian fashion both in dress and behaviour, so Caragiale's faddists enter the good world by clinging to every fashionable fad. The Union Gardens, a place where the people of the centre and the rising stars of the suburbs gather, is a temple of easy culture and entertainment. Light comedies, variety and escapist shows are a good opportunity for the elites to meet and display themselves to society in the clothes of principle and good taste. These outings cause great strife in their troubled home, but even when they become a problem, the fad must be fulfilled. "Well! Dude, parol, you know you're curious! What, for those comedies we go? We're going to see the world. What, you mean everyone who goes there understands something, you think? They only go like that for a goat; why shouldn't we go too?"⁶

Love letters were also fashionable, pompously ornamented, written with pathos and excitement. Rică Venturiano is a duplicitous man, dressing up

⁵ Look at Ioana Pârvulescu, *Lumea ca ziar. A patra putere: Caragiale*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2011.

⁶ Ion Luca Caragiale, *Teatru*, Editura Facla, Timișoara, 1983, p. 29.

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as a fierce political publicist, but also playing the role of a rapacious lover, able to brave the dangers of the slums for the sake of adventure. Stirred by Zița's debauchery, Rică runs madly in search of her: "I'm suffering beyond all possibility, it's as if I'm rabid (...) I've sought you to immortality (...) you are the star, I can for to say the lighthouse, that shines sublime in the dark night of my existence (...) "⁷ making some very convincing statements. So he mimics the behaviour of a greedy conqueror, becoming the cheap image of an adventurer, a flyboy capable of biting into the bodies of the women he hunts. Rică's behaviour proves to be borrowed in the comedy's finale, when, in danger of being killed by angry men who want to wash away his honour, he adopts the hand of a timid coward for whose actions he does not claim responsibility. His failure to take responsibility for his own actions is yet another argument for the thesis that the Caragiale's character is the expression of *kitsch-man*.

Every time has its own trends, as evidenced by the activities that fill the free time of Caragiale's people. Zița, for example, when she finishes reading the Syropoean novels - *The Dramas of Paris* - which she goes through three times, does not accept that literature can be more than that.⁸ Let us note the following statement by Matei Călinescu from *Five Faces of Modernity*: "the *kitsch-man* wants to fill his free time with maximum excitement (derived also from «high culture»), in exchange for minimum effort. His ideal is effortless fun."⁹ Not far from the life of the people in Caragiale's texts, the synthesis offered by Matei Călinescu captures the attitude of the characters in *A Stormy Night and Company* and the small society it reveals. The existence of the grotesque figures revolves in a mediocre and comfortable environment, without essential reliefs, but with hidden ambitions. If in appearance Jupân Dumitrache declares with false modesty his condition as a petty merchant (the final dialogue of the play), in the privacy of his home, accompanied by friends, he emphatically insists on the attire he feels obliged to maintain in society: "but you know, I have ambitions; I thought: me a merchant... to put me in the public with a bagabont like that doesn't make..."¹⁰

⁷ Idem, pp. 38-39.

⁸ Look at Ioana Pârvulescu, *În intimitatea secolului 19*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2013.

⁹ Matei Călinescu, *Cinci fețe ale modernității*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2017, p. 291.

¹⁰ Ion Luca Caragiale, Teatru, ed. cit., p. 17.

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Ștefan Cazimir points out an extremely relevant aspect, namely the synonymy between the concept of *moft* / (*english*) *fad* and the more modern concept of *kitsch*: "The word *kitsch* can serve a foreigner to understand more easily what *fad* means. The word *fad* can help a Romanian to grasp more quickly what *kitsch* means. By *fad* we mean Romanian *kitsch*. By *kitsch* - the universal *fad*."¹¹ The *fad* originates from the Turkish language, where its meaning is cheap, free, worthless. Caragiale often uses the word *fad*, which has become an aesthetic category in his literature. There are many passages in which it is invoked to demonstrate the superficiality of the slum or the trivial centre and to criticise them at the same time. In our performance too, the *fad* plays an essential role, beginning with the presentation of the mourning clothes made by Zița and Veta Titircă, a possible variant of the development of the family business, and ending, perhaps, with Zița's *kitsch* engagement to Rică Venturiano. One can see from the images created that the show focuses on a world where worthlessness is imbued in the atmosphere, becoming a state of affairs. Bad taste is a *sine qua non* for being part of the Caragiale's slum that Garabet Ibrăileanu understood as a category of the soul. Everything seems cheap, and especially the ambitions of the characters, which become authentic especially in crisis situations, when we notice that dress and education are cheap inventions. Even the names of the characters are in stark contrast to their apparent allure.¹²

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¹¹ Ștefan Cazimir, *Ion Luca Caragiale față cu kitsch-ul*, ed. cit., p. 21.

¹² Look at Garabet Ibrăileanu, *Scriitori români, vol. II*, Editura Minerva, București, 1974.

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