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“Bullshit TV conversations” or Intertextuality in *Night Train*

Maryla Hopfinger, a Polish anthropologist of culture, in her discussion of the impact of the audio-visual media on contemporary culture defines a certain mechanism of perception which favours audio-visual experiencing and representation of the world; Hopfinger calls it the “audio-visual syndrome.” She also notes a major change in the function and status of literature in the course of the twentieth century; in the past literature owed its high status to the role it played in shaping our view of the world, our imagination, patterns of behaviour and moral judgements. Nowadays this function has been taken over by the visual media and literature is trying to adapt to the genres of film and television in order to attract the readers who are, primarily, viewers (Hopfinger 184–5).

Rather than lament the sorry state of literature today, the present paper proposes to draw on and celebrate the knowledge that our students seem to have of film. Jerome Klinkowitz postulates teaching literature through focusing on writers who are still living, I propose that we focus on literature which requires some

degree of cineliteracy on the part of the reader. A few years ago I discovered that university students who may unashamedly admit ignorance about certain great works of literature are still very snobbish about what films they have seen. This paper proposes to harness this snobbery into an intertextual analysis of a relatively underestimated novel by Martin Amis.

Having hit the tabloid headlines with his extravagant dental treatment and divorce from his publisher and his wife in mid-1990s, Amis published his eighth novel in 1995. *The Information* was received without enthusiasm, more as a cultural phenomenon than an important novel; it was recognised to be a part of a triptych with *Money* and *London Fields*. In 1997 he published *Night Train*, a short spoof detective novel, which was ignored by most critics and almost univocally criticised by those who chose to mention it. Anita Brookner wrote in her review that: “[to] read it is to undergo a temporary brain dysfunction. . . .” She was dissatisfied with every aspect of *Night Train*: the conclusion, the red herrings, the figure of the detective, the American idiom, which she suspected to be a homage to Saul Bellow. Brookner concluded her review: “I found it frustrating, and all the more so because I expected more from an author whose dithyrambic narratives have so engaged me in the past” (36–7). Sean O’Brien in the *Times Literary Supplement* was equally unimpressed: “as a novella among other material in a collection, *Night Train* would be a striking curiosity, but as a thing in itself it must throw doubts on Amis’s literary wisdom” (22).

I would like to discuss *Night Train* as more than a clumsy spoof detective story and argue that it is an intellectual and intertextual joke that Amis plays on the critics who compare him with the American writers and criticise him for his sexist portrayal of women. In *Night Train*, Amis is playing with the

genre, the medium and with his own literary reputation. The novel is "dialogic" in the Bakhtinian sense; it enters into a polemic with other texts. Genette, who specializes in generating terminology, has coined the label of "metatextuality" for such polemic and commentary (319).

Amis has been criticised as a misogynist for his stereotyping of women as sex objects; *London Fields* achieved a certain notoriety for its exclusion from the Booker Prize shortlist in 1989, after a protest of two women judges (Ellison 21). It is no coincidence that the narrator of *Night Train* not only is a woman, but also is as far from a sex object or a male sexual fantasy as a female character can possibly get. Her name is Mike Hoolihan, she is a forty-four-year-old, five foot ten, heavily overweight, dyed blonde with a damaged liver. But above all, as she insists, she is "a police", not "a policewoman" and as she self-consciously informs the reader on the first page; the novel is "an account of the worst case [she] had ever handled" (*Night Train* 1). The reader soon discovers that the case is a suicide of Jennifer Rockwell, a beautiful and successful twenty-eight-year-old daughter of Hoolihan's former boss, who had helped the narrator deal with her alcohol problem in the past. Initially, the plot unfolds in keeping with the rules of the genre; Jennifer's father insists that she must have been murdered as she had no reason to commit suicide, the fact that she was found naked and apparently killed herself by firing three bullets into her mouth seems to corroborate his theory. As an old family friend, Mike is put on the case, but in spite of her efforts to force a confession out of Jennifer's partner, Trader Faulkner, or to find a motive for murder or at least a cause for suicide, the case is closed. However, as she proceeds with the investigation, she also goes over her own history of sexual abuse in her childhood, growing up in an institution, career in the police, abusive relationships with

men and alcoholism. Gradually she admits being in love with Jennifer's father and identifies with her more and more. Having found a book on suicide in Jennifer's flat and confirmed previous cases of people shooting themselves with several bullets in the mouth she is forced to close the case, and shoots herself in the end.

John Updike was favourably predisposed to this novel, recognising that "Amis is one of the few English writers of any era who has attempted to learn anything from the Americans." He noticed that *Night Train* "promisingly, is a takeoff on those Hammett/Chandler/Cain "tough-guy" detective stories behind *noir* films." However, further on in this review all he had to say about *Night Train* were words of relentless criticism:

The novel's style evinces the simple faith that repeating something magically deepens it. . . . But the trouble . . . my trouble, the reviewer's trouble – with [*Night Train*] isn't the faux-demotic mannerisms or the heavy debt that Amis's Oz of an America owes to frequently cited cop shows on the telly but with the unmentionable way the plot proceeds. (Updike 1)

Updike seems to refuse to register irony in the style and plot of *Night Train*. Hoolihan's interior monologues are slangy and full of jargon which is supposed to imitate police-speak in America; naturally Chandler's Philip Marlow is the first association that comes to mind. Yet it is impossible not to notice that the style is overdone as Hoolihan is not really tough but, trying to sound tough and poetic at the same time:

There is a glass door marked Vice. There is no glass door marked Sin. The city is the offense. We are the defense. (*Night Train* 2)

Some say you can't top the adrenaline (and the dirty cash) of Narcotics, and all agree that Kidnapping is a million laughs (if murder in America is largely black on black, then kidnapping is

largely gang on gang,) and *Sex Offenses* has its followers, and *Vice* has its votaries, and *Intelligence* means what it says (*Intelligence* runs deep and brings in the deep-sea malefactors), but everyone is quietly aware that *Homicide* is the daddy. *Homicide* is the show.

(*Night Train* 3)

Grief brings out the taste of cigarettes, better than coffee, better than booze, better than sex.

(*Night Train* 61)

Given the above adages of the narrator and the plot which reveals nothing except for the narrator's incompetence and dysfunctionality, the reader would have to have a very low opinion of Amis's literary talents not to read the novel as a parody. As Hutcheon points out, "parody . . . is a form of imitation characterised by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text," it entails "repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity" (6). Hutcheon's two categories: "distance" and "difference" are crucial for the discussion of the relationship between *Night Train* and detective fiction as well as the structure of the novel. Hutcheon notes that "parody invites a more literal and literary reading of a text" (69), hence the "difference" between the narrative voice (tough, self-confident, experienced) and the plot (which seems to be a typical resolved plot of a murder mystery; yet, the initial promise of a hair-raising thriller remains unfulfilled) should not be read as an artistic failure, but provocation.

In their comprehensive study of the female detectives in the history of British and American detective fiction, Craig and Cadogan state that "[the] important feature that distinguishes detective fiction as a genre [from the romantic thriller for example] is 'sensation,' the focus of interest is shifted from the victim or intended victim to the disinterested onlooker, the investigator.

The emphasis is on the secret, the intellectual game of solving the puzzle" (12). The difference between *Night Train* and a conventional detective story defined above must strike even the inexperienced reader; Hoolihan is not a "disinterested onlooker", she is put on the case because she knew the victim and is indebted to her family, but what is most striking is the lack of mystery; what seemed to be a suicide in the opening of the narrative, is declared a suicide in the closing part. This must be what Updike refers to when he writes in his review quoted earlier in this section about "the unmentionable way the plot proceeds." It is astonishing that Updike refuses to read this eschewing of mystery as a deliberate violation of the rules of the genre which Stephen Heath presents succinctly in his study of *Nouveau Roman*:

The purpose of the detective novel is to end; the body of the novel is no more than a massive parenthesis between violence and its solution. . . . The reading depends on the assurance of the ending (an assurance guaranteed by the expectations of the genre which is carefully defined according to strict rules) that will fix the ending in a final truth, thus defining the text as without plurality. . . . This is the *comfort* of the detective story: it offers a deep confirmation of the non-problematic nature of reality. (33-4)

The "set of rules" and the promise of "truth" must attract a postmodernist writer like Amis; they are there to be broken. The "non-problematic nature of reality" is to be undermined.

Night Train is a parody of the detective story in all its manifestations from literature, through film to television. The novel is peppered with cues: Hoolihan's imitation of Chandler's Philip Marlow is clumsy but unmistakable; the Philippino expert in dissection, Dr No, is more than an allusion to Fielding's James Bond stories; *Dr No* is the title of the first James Bond movie. The

affinities between the thriller or crime movie and detective fiction are well-studied, early crime movies relied heavily on the fictional model. But the late 1940s and early 1950s mark a turning point in the development of this genre in cinema; the meticulously composed plot gives way to a loose collection of scenes; the old credo that "crime does not pay" vanishes; morality disappears from the focal position it had before; the rational explanation of the crime is replaced with irrational motives; the main hero no longer is an honest young man, but a sleuth of dubious morality (Helman 23). Howard Hawks's film version of *The Big Sleep* (1943) is a good example of this evolution of the genre. The script based on Chandler's novel, was co-written by Hawks and William Faulkner. Helman notes that neither Hawks nor Faulkner seemed concerned with the eight unexplained murders, they concentrated on the characters and the relationships between them, instead (47). Jennifer partner's name, Trader Faulkner is not only a vague allusion to American literature, but seems to underline the novel's relationships with film; like William Faulkner in *The Big Sleep*, Amis is not really preoccupied with the mystery.

However, the cinema is not the main point of reference in *Night Train*; the novel is crammed with references and allusions to television. In *London Fields*, television was present as one of the elements of the represented world; here it is the original parodied text. Amis is involved in an intertextual game with the American television cop show; *Miami Vice*, *Kojack*, *Starsky and Hutch*. Chandler, Hammett and Cain's narrators, whom Updike identifies in the review quoted above, are present in the novel indirectly, only in so much as they have seeped through to our cinematic consciousness and created a typical detective figure. That figure is exploited by the TV series and parodied in *Night Train*.

Recognising the novel as a parody of TV cop shows provides an explanation for the clichés, witticisms, repetition and clumsy Americanism in the narrative voice that have enraged Updike so much. According to Nycz, cliché is the basic figure of intertextuality and a fundamental element of literary *mimesis*. It is an essential tool of parody and a strategy of exposing the realist illusion in the metafictional, intertextual collage (107). Hoolihan's voice should not be approached as a written text, but a quoted record of speech, a record of voice-over narration so characteristic of detective film (Kozloff 41). The reader imagines a low husky voice reading Hoolihan's lines, and, in fact, her voice is referred to as low and masculine more than once in the text. As Kozloff notes, voice-over is "anchored to writing", the filmic narrator frequently reads pages from a book or a diary. In *Night Train*, the narrator reconstructs the case from her notes, she is highly self-conscious, apologises for her style and errors in the tenses, and constantly compares her investigation and experience with what television presents. The case starts when she receives a phone call from her colleague in Homicide, on hearing that he wants her to notify somebody of the death of their relative she records the following thinking process:

I considered. I could have said, "I don't do that anymore" (though Asset Forfeiture, in fact, is hardly corpse-free). And then we might have had one of those bullshit TV conversations, with him saying *You ought to help me out* and *Mike, I'm begging you* and me saying *Forget it* and *No way* and *Dream on, pal* until everyone is bored blind and I finally came across. I mean, why say no when you have to say yes? For things to proceed. So I just said, again: Well, let's hear it.

"Colonel Tom's daughter killed herself tonight."

"Jennifer?" And it just came out. I said: "You're fucking me."

“I wish I was fucking you, Mike. Really . . .” (Night Train 6)

Significantly the dialogue that follows is not at all less clichéd than the one discarded as “bullshit TV conversations”. When Jennifer’s father phones Mike to ask her to investigate the case, a similar internal monologue takes place:

TV, etcetera, has had a terrible effect on perpetrators. It has given them *style*. And TV has ruined American juries for ever. And American lawyers. But TV has also fucked up us police. No profession has been so massively fictionalized. I had a bunch of great lines ready. Like: *I was quit when you came in here. I’m twice as quit now*. But this was Colonel Tom I was talking to. So I spoke the plain truth.

“You saved my life. I’d do anything for you. You know that.”

(Night Train 18)

Hoolihan repeatedly rejects a certain line of dialogue as worn-out and unrealistic, only to produce in the same breath something even more kitch. Those internal monologues constitute the narrator’s self-consciousness, but the fact that she is unable to produce a line of dialogue different from what she finds so “unreal” on TV places the reader at a distance from her. Amis’s implied author is winking to the reader behind his narrator’s back. Similarly the descriptions of Jennifer’s beauty are a litany of meaningless clichés: “Brilliant, beautiful. Yeah, I’m thinking: To-die-for brilliant. Drop-dead beautiful” (Night Train 6). The choice of adjectives, given that she is speaking of a victim, is yet another mark of Hoolihan’s awkwardness. To use Hutcheon’s definition of parody again; Amis exploits the two categories of distance and difference; he builds the reader’s distance to the narrator by eliminating the difference that she insists exists between her and the parodied television show. In other words, Hoolihan

protests too much. Following Lodge's analysis of doubly-oriented speech in *Ulysses*, I will claim that "the cliché-ridden language of [Hoolihan] is neither *diegesis* nor *mimesis*, nor a blend of the two, but a kind of *pseudodiegesis* achieved by the *mimesis* not of a character's speech but of a discourse," the discourse of the American TV cop shows (Lodge 34–6).

The character of Hoolihan and her limited perception of reality can be traced back to the *London Fields* and its bad guy, Keith Talent, who not only spoke in tabloid headlines, but to the horror of the narrator, perceived the world in this way. In constructing Hoolihan, Amis expands this idea and creates a character as limited as Keith Talent, who makes self-conscious comments on the banality of television; yet, is herself trapped by this banality. By making Hoolihan the focalizer, Amis manipulates the type and amount of information that the reader gets. Because it is narrated and focalized by Hoolihan, the reality depicted in the novel is saturated with TV in two ways. One is Hoolihan's cinematic perception of reality: when she enters the room where Jennifer has shot herself she looks round the place first and at the body last, just as a camera would. When after the funeral she tries to come to terms with the fact that Jennifer was not murdered her interior monologue reads like a screenplay:

I think we all have this image in our heads now, and the sounds. We have these frames of film. Tom and Miriam have them. I have them. In the small interrogation room I watched them form on the other side of Trader's eyes – these frames of film that show the death of Jennifer Rockwell.

You wouldn't see her. You'd see the wall behind her head. Then the first detonation, and its awful flower. Then a beat, then a moan and a shudder. Then the second shot. Then a beat, a gulp, a sigh. Then the third.

You wouldn't see her.

(*Night Train* 64–5)

It is worth noting that the "frames of film" in the quoted extract are not stylistically neutral; they constitute a highly conventionalised depiction of a suicide scene. Hitchcock would film it like that, because of his elegant style; a television film would avoid showing the victim for television must not show drastic scenes, but Tarantino would probably focus the camera on Jennifer's exploding head. Thus, when Hoolihan constructs "frames of film", they are frames of a television film.

The other form of saturation of the represented world with television is more obvious and consists in Hoolihan's frequent references to it. Describing the Italian looks of her colleague, Silvera, Hoolihan makes an offhand comment: "he's just seen too many movies, like the rest of us" (*Night Train* 30). When she does not receive a written report from the dissection of Jennifer's body, but a video tape, she makes a tasteless pun on the word "cut" and adds: "It used to be a microphone and you'd take polaroids. Now it's a camera. Now it's TV." (*Night Train* 23) The voyeuristic element is emphasised by her noting the "almost pornographic" quality in the film. The world constructed by Amis is very flat and devoid of detail, hence the omnipresence of television must be all the more striking; Hoolihan's boyfriend is constantly watching quiz shows on TV, Jennifer's elderly neighbour is not sure how many shots she heard because she was watching "some cop thing" on TV (*Night Train* 38); the Italian Mafia have adapted their procedures to the code of honour presented in the movies; Hoolihan tells stories of suicides committed for no apparent reason and concludes:

Motive might have been worth considering, might have been pretty reliable, might have been in okay shape half a century ago. But now it's all up in the fucking air. With the TV.

I'll tell you who wants a why. *Jurors* want a why. They want reruns of *Perry Mason* and *The Defenders*. They want *Car Fifty-Four, Where Are You?*

They want commercials every ten minutes or it never happened.

(*Night Train* 107–8)

As the narrative progresses the TV appears increasingly in the role of a medium shaping the reality rather than reflecting it. The narrator constantly draws comparisons between her reality and TV: “with TV you expect everything to measure up. Things are meant to measure up. The punishment will answer the crime. The crime will fall within psychological profile of the malefactor . . .” (*Night Train* 107), but in Hoolihan’s reality it ostensibly is not the case. Nothing really seems to measure up; quite early on the reader learns that there was no murder and that Hoolihan’s quest for the motive of the suicide is futile. What is more, a careful reader will detect a number of inconsistencies in Hoolihan’s narrative; starting from the fact that the stunningly beautiful Jennifer weighed rather more than an average beauty queen (140 lb.) and although Hoolihan calls her Miss Modest, her partner’s testimony reveals her voracious sex life. Hoolihan’s memories of “drying up” in the Rockwell’s house are conflicting, at one point in the novel she remembers lying for days in a back room on the ground floor and Jennifer, still a child, reading to her (*Night Train* 21); at some other point, the room is a bedroom of one of Jennifer’s brothers and Jennifer is seventeen and doing drugs herself (*Night Train* 71). Hoolihan is completely exposed by Trader Faulkner; when she plays tough to force a confession out of him and tries to bully him, he catches her out on the meaning of “grand jury” and deflates her assumed Dirty Harry approach:

Will you sit the polygraph? The lie-detector? Because I think you ought to know what the next stage is in all this. Trader, you're going before the grand jury. Know what that is? Yes, I'm going to *grand-jury* you, Trader. Yes I am. . . . Okay. Let's start from the very beginning. We're going to go through all this a few more times.

He looks up slowly. And his face is clear. . . .

As it happens, Detective Hoolihan, I do know what a grand jury is. It's a hearing to establish whether a case is strong enough to go to trial. That's all. You probably think I think it's the Supreme Court. Same as all the befuddled bastards that come through here. This is so . . . pathetic. Oh, Mike, you poor bitch. Listen to you.

(*Night Train* 56–7)

In this way, the reader is gradually made aware of the discrepancies between what the narrator tells him and what the text presents as facts. Amis constructs "a narration that the implied reader must call into question" (Chatman 151).

In order to fully appreciate the intertextual game that Amis plays with various media in *Night Train*, it is necessary to distinguish between the characteristic features of the cinema and television. John Ellis in *Visible Fictions* argues that "broadcast TV has developed distinctive aesthetic forms to suit the circumstances within which it is used" (111). These aesthetic forms can account for what seems to be seriously flawed setting and characterisation in Amis's novel. Ellis explains that:

Contrasting with cinema's profusion (and sometimes excess) of detail, broadcast TV's image is stripped-down, lacking in detail. . . . Being small, low definition, subject to attention that will not be sustained, the TV image becomes jealous of its meaning. It is unwilling to waste it on details and inessentials. So background and context tend to be sketched rather than brought forward and subject to a certain fetishism of details that often occurs in cinema,

especially art cinema. The narratively important detail is stressed by this lack of other detail. . . . This is particularly so with American crime series, where speed of action and transition from one segment to another dictates the concentration of resources on the single meaning. (130)

This is ostensibly the case in *Night Train*, a novel so bereft of detail that it immediately attracts the reader's attention. Both Updike and Brookner have taken up the lack of detail in the setting and characterisation in their reviews of *Night Train*; surprisingly, both writers interpret it as an accidental flaw in Amis's style, an artistic weakness and ignore the affinities with television in this context. Yet all the stylistic elements from the way in which the homodiegetic narrator introduces herself, the frequent addresses to the reader, through the setting in a typical American town completely devoid of any detail, down to the weird syntax in the unrealistic dialogues, point to trashy cop shows on television. Paradoxically, unlike on television, the lack of detail does not serve the purpose of not distracting the reader from the fast action. There is no action in *Night Train*, no mystery and no solution there is only "[s]uicide [which] is the night train speeding your way to darkness," (*Night Train* 67) and a writer involved in a tug of war with the critics and the medium whose pervasiveness he seems to resent.

As Nycz states in his essay on intertextuality: "the cultural competence of the reader determines the range of intertextual references" (82). This analysis certainly does not cover the whole range of intertextual references which can be found in *Night Train*. The most prominent ones are those which can be defined in Bakhtin's terms as "hidden polemic" with those critics who denounce Amis's predilection for the Americanisms, and his

marginalisation of women characters. The intertext of detective fiction, whose convention is set in stable, unambiguous reality, allows the author an opportunity to comment on the nature of reality and its representation. By highlighting the omnipresence of television, Amis exposes its power of imposing its aesthetics and discourse on reality. Television seems to have taken over the role of reality as a point of reference; in a truly postmodern fashion, Amis implies that television is the only reality we have access to. As a parody, the novel does not imitate reality, but other texts and genres, therefore it becomes "a critical representation of literariness of literature" (Nycz 225).

I have cited Hopfinger's claim about para-audiovisual literature in the opening paragraph of this paper, but I shall return to it here, because it is particularly relevant to the discussion of *Night Train*. She points out that popular literature which had been a model for early cinema and was the inspiration for genre cinema, subsequently adapted to the cinematic novelty. Literature has incorporated the cinematic novelties in its development and has become a literary version of the audio-visual medium. She lists, amongst others, such popular genres as detective story, gangster story, science fiction and thriller (101). Amis's novel is an example corroborating the above claim; it is a highly self-conscious literary parody of a television cop show whose objective is to question our assumptions about the relationship between the reality and representations of reality. The cinematic elements in the text consist in clichés, quotations from and allusions to films *noir* and television series. The novel is undoubtedly aimed at an audience who is highly literate in these genres, and who will be prepared to examine the conventions from a distance offered by parody.

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