

Survival in Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*

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Abstract

A growing number of writers have created an entirely new form of fiction –sometimes called metafiction, others surfiction or fabulation– which shares a number of specific stylistic features and questions the fact that traditional works with linear plot, recognizable characters and theme as well as unity of time and space can depict a reality that is characterized by being unfixed, unknowable and chaotic.

This paper is concerned with the theme of survival in the fiction of the Polish Jewish writer Jerzy Kosinski. His first well-known novel *The Painted Bird* (1965) is the fictionalised account of his own childhood odyssey through Eastern Europe during WW II. The story depicts the travels of a young Jewish refugee in his effort to survive, at any cost, in the time of the Holocaust. His experiences occur beyond the limits of what may be considered human actions –the cruelty people are capable of inflicting upon each other in the name of war or ideology–.

Key words: metafiction, unfixed reality, survival, World War II, Jewish refugee.

La supervivencia en la novela El Pájaro Pintado de J. Kosinski

Resumen

La metaficción es una ficción diferente y novedosa que posee rasgos estilísticos específicos. Esta escritura innovadora cuestiona la narrativa tradicional con un argumento lineal, con personajes y temas reconocibles, así como con unidad de tiempo y espacio porque describen una realidad que se caracteriza por ser inestable, desconocida y caótica.

En este trabajo se analiza el tema de la supervivencia en la ficción del escritor polaco Jerzy Kosinski. Su primera novela conocida, *The Painted Bird* (1965), describe la historia de su propia odisea vivida durante su niñez en Europa Oriental durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial. La historia trata de los viajes de un joven refugiado judío en su esfuerzo por sobrevivir, a pesar de continuas situaciones extremas, en la época del Holocausto. Sus experiencias ocurren más allá de los límites de las que pueden ser consideradas acciones humanas –la crueldad que las personas son capaces de infligir unos a otros en nombre de la guerra o cierta ideología–.

Palabras clave: metaficción, realidad inestable, supervivencia, Segunda Guerra Mundial, refugiado judío.

Linda Hutcheon refers to Postmodernism as “a problemizing force in our culture today: it raises questions about the common-sensical and the ‘natural’. But it never offers answers that are anything but provisional and contextually determined (and limited)” (1998: xi). Also, she expresses that there are manifestations of the postmodern in different artistic productions such as film, video, photography, painting, dance, music, and other literary genres. When embodied in literature, Postmodernism is reflected as expressions of openness, pluralism, marginality, difference, fragmentation, ambiguity and popular culture, among others, questioning the very basis of any certainty and of any standards of judgement. There is also a decentering of the subject and a search for individuality and authenticity. This assertion of identity through difference and specificity is a constant in postmodern thought.

Postmodernism in American fiction came in the late 1960s and early 1970s when a group of young writers proposed a fiction whose prime feature would be its own physical structure of words, sentences and paragraphs. In Lois Gordon’s words, though many of them continue publishing traditional fiction, “a growing number of writers have [...] created an entirely new form” which “shares a number of specific stylistic characteristics and the notion that the old fictional devices are no longer appropriate to the modern world” (1983: 1). This new kind of fiction –called metafiction, surfiction or fabulation– questions the fact that traditional works with linear plot, recognizable characters and theme as well as unity of time and space can depict a reality that is characterized by being unfixated, unknowable and chaotic.

Writing fiction involves fragmentation as a means through which both author and reader assert meaningful, patterns regarding human experience. Most authors include new elements into their writing; namely, absence of plot linearity, pictorial designs (drawings, charts, diagrams, lists, quotations), multiple points of view and irony. As Gordon (1983) states, “a new spatial, collage like form emerges, where character, place, event, and point of view reflect the plasticity of ordinary experience” (p. 5). Each new reading gives way to new interpretations, since the reader takes part in the creation of meaning.

Another critic of postmodern fiction, Raymond Federman (1993), expresses that to write is to produce meaning and not to reproduce a pre-existing meaning. He asserts that the reading of fiction has to be renewed and that it is the writer’s task to provide the means by rethinking the position of words, sentences and paragraphs on the page (p. 8). Surfiction does not attempt to be meaningful, but just a discourse open to multiple interpretations on the part of the reader who creates an order and a meaning for the creatures and the material of fiction. As regards its shape, surfictional discourse will circle around itself, create new and unexpected movements and so will the events related in the narration do. Since the material of fiction is invention, there are no limits beyond

the writer's power of imagination and the people of fiction will be changeable, irrational and nameless 'word-beings' –not characters– disregarding any social or psychological function, and detached from the real world (Federman 1993: 40-47).

In recent decades the flourishing of American autobiography is one of the notable cultural developments; it is a rich and characteristically American mode of storytelling –the self living history– and a historical consciousness that speaks out of singular experience, from some particular social group to a wider audience. It is an act of perception and creation: the influences from the past that helped shape one's personality to express one's unique individuality. The language of autobiography points both outward to the world of remembered experience and inward to a reflective consciousness, as in Kosinski's work. Thus, it can be said that autobiography, like all narratives, is fact and fiction at the same time.

Kosinski's novel, *The Painted Bird* (1965), chronicles the terrors of a homeless unnamed child of war who has been separated from his parents for five years and wanders through remote villages. Victimized by superstitious peasants, he witnesses and is subjected to horrific scenes of cruelty, violence and sexual perversion so unspeakable that he becomes mute. There is juxtaposition of innocence in childhood and the most brutal form of adult experience. According to the writer, it is an account of his own experiences during the war –an expression of his inward chaotic reality–. Full of graphic scenes depicting rape, torture, and bestiality, the novel portrays evil in all its manifestations and speaks of human isolation as inevitable. It is an important recognition of the other victims of the Holocaust, the European outcasts we so rarely hear about. It also shows what any society is capable of at any moment –the potential to be persecuted by our own kind because of our ethnic origin, gender, religious beliefs or sexual orientation–. And, due to our instinct for self preservation, there is a possibility that we join in the flock's savage attack on 'the painted bird'. The dark-haired Polish child who is taken for either Gypsy or Jew learns how to stay alive, above all circumstances, turning survival into a moral imperative.

A village in Poland seemed a safe place to protect a six-year-old boy from the Nazis. But after his guardian Martha dies, the boy is obliged to go from village to village in search of food and shelter. The protagonist survives the abuse inflicted by men, women, children and beasts to be found by his parents –some years later– a cold, indifferent person. The experiences narrated by the young character of this story reveal that the Holocaust went beyond Germany and its Nazi concentration camps. There is a sense of connectedness between cultures, people and ideas that runs all through the book. The non-industrialized villages of Poland, which have been "neglected for centuries" (Kosinski 1965: 4) seem to contrast with 'civilized' Nazi Germany; however, both cultures enforce a doctrine of hate upon those groups whom they perceive to be inferior.

Survival, the most notorious theme that emerges from this novel, is reinforced by other recurring themes such as exile, identity, cruelty, language, absence of morals. These concepts mirror the author's personal struggles and suffering. Although Kosinski's wartime experiences have been questioned in recent years, it seems he has spent the war years hiding with peasants, together with his family, in relatively comfortable circumstances (Sloan 1996). Nevertheless, the author has learnt to hide his identity as child, and has grown to deny his homeland, to live abroad and to work in a foreign language.

The novel is divided in chapters, each of them occurring at a different place, not clearly stated, somewhere in Poland. The story opens with a description of its unnamed protagonist's exile: "In the first weeks of World War II, in the fall of 1939, a six-year-old boy from a large city in Eastern Europe was sent by his parents, like thousands of other children, to the shelter of a distant village" (Kosinski 1965: 3). The lack of details of the passage shows the unimportance of the boy's ordeal, which is considered a matter of course at the time.

An expression of the theme of exile is the quest that the child starts from the moment his guardian dies, which turns into the central purpose of his life. This is not, however, a process of positive growth and discovery for him; it is purely a matter of surviving. The quest typically begins with a 'call' which sets the hero on the road to adventure. In contrast, our 'young hero' is only summoned by continuous threats of death. Soon, the boy realizes that he can rely on no one but himself for his survival.

I was ready to start a new life. I had all that was needed and gloried in the knowledge that the days of punishment and humiliation would soon be past. Until now I had been a small bug that anyone might squash. From now on the humble bug would become an unapproachable bull. (Kosinski 1965: 126)

In his search for identity, as the boy wanders through several villages, he meets different people who, instead of helping him find the right way, attack him all the time. He feels at a loss having been deprived of his roots: he has no name, no family, no home, no town. This idea is closely connected with the title of the book, which has been taken from an episode in chapter five about a peasant named Leikh who makes his living by trapping birds and selling them to the villagers. In moments of intense rage, he captures a bird, ties it to his wrist, and paints its entire body in bright, rainbow colours. Then, he releases it into the air and the bird flies back to its flock. The other birds do not welcome it as one of their own kind; they attack it and tear it to pieces and when Leikh and the boy find the painted bird it is 'usually dead' (Kosinski 1965: 51). The boy is like the painted bird, as human as those who surround him, yet unrecognised and attacked because of his ethnic origin. The contrast between 'us' and 'them' is central to this story of extreme alienation and prejudice. When the boy arrives at the first village, there is "a

crowd of men gathering around me, talking a dialect unknown to me.” And the boy “feared their suspicious looks and movements” (Kosinski 1965: 15).

The crowd became livelier. A stone struck me. I lay down face to the earth, not wishing to know what might happen next. My head was being bombarded with dried cow dung, moldy potatoes, apple cores, handfuls of dirt, and small stones. I covered my face with my hands and screamed into the dust which covered the road. (Kosinski 1965: 16)

While living in another village, the Germans arrive. The boy's master at the time hides him “in a skilfully camouflaged cellar beneath the barn”; and when the man realizes “that I looked like a Gypsy; [...] he shaved my black hair” (Kosinski 1965: 95). Then, the protagonist expresses his dream of an easy and more pleasant life: he would like to invent “a fuse for the human body which, when lighted, would change old skin for new and alter the colour of the eyes and hair. [...] A fuse which would protect anybody from an evil eye”. (Kosinski 1965: 91)

From the first pages of the novel, humans are compared to animals. Such comparisons reflect the Nazi treatment of Jews as non-human as well as the Jews subsequent self-identification with powerless and inferior beings. A clear example is the way two peasants fight at a reception.

In the middle of the hut they rushed at each other, clutched at each other's throat, and fell on the dirty floor. They bit with their teeth like enraged dogs, tearing off pieces of clothing and flesh. Their horny hands and knees and shoulders and feet seemed to have a life of their own. [...] He [the man on top] triumphantly blew himself up like a bullfrog. (Kosinski 1965: 74)

There are many more descriptive passages in the book in which simple animal behaviour seems a reflection of human intercourse. The fight for survival and attacks on weaker members of their own kind perfectly mirror the human action of the book since the boy “felt now like the mangy dog that the partisans had killed. They had first stroke his head and scratched him behind the ears. [...] Then they tossed him a bone. [...] When he seized the bone and proudly lifted it, they shot him” (Kosinski 1965: 74-75).

The villagers' behaviour has much to do with the idea of cruelty and suffering. Through superstitious beliefs, the peasants express their hatred for the boy who is thoroughly convinced that demons and devils are real and that he is “possessed by an evil spirit, which crouched in me like a mole in deep burrow, and of whose presence I was unaware. [...] I could stare at other people and unknowingly cast a spell over them” (Kosinski 1965: 20). Many people also fear him. Whenever he walks “through the village alone, people would turn their heads and make the sign of the cross”, and “pregnant women would run away from me in panic” (Kosinski 1965: 21).

These people's repulsive cruelty is not limited to Jews or Gypsies, but anyone getting

in their way is violently harmed. The rule of the strong over the weak prevails and justifies any actions performed. What ties the villagers' superstitions together with totalitarianism is best stated in the prologue of *The Painted Bird*, "The only law [in the villages] was the traditional right of the stronger and wealthier over the weaker and poorer" (Kosinski 1965: 4). The protagonist cannot believe his eyes when he witnesses a jealous miller gouging out the eyes of a young plowboy.

With a single kick the miller got the woman out of his way. And with a rapid movement such as women use to gouge out the rotten spots while peeling potatoes, he plunged the spoon into one of the boy's eyes and twisted it.

The eye sprang out of his face like a yolk from a broken egg and rolled down the miller's hand onto the floor. The plowboy howled and shrieked, but the miller's hold kept him pinned against the wall. Then the blood-covered spoon plunged into the other eye, which sprang out even faster. For a moment the eye rested on the boy's cheek as if uncertain what to do next; then it finally tumbled down his shirt onto the floor. (Kosinski 1965: 37-38)

As the novel progresses, the protagonist changes his mind about his religious beliefs and turns to Catholicism as the answer to all his problems. It is 'a step in the right direction', he thinks, after hearing "the priest explaining to an old man that for certain prayers God granted from one hundred to three hundred days of indulgence" (Kosinski 1965: 125). So, he believes that those who say more prayers earn more days of indulgence, and will live better. In that way, he thinks he understands "why some people were strong and others weak, some free and others enslaved, some rich and others poor, some well and others sick" (Kosinski 1965: 125). Thus, he tries to learn the prayers marked with the largest number of indulgence days since he feels he is "ready to start a new life" (Kosinski 1965: 126).

But, unfortunately, his prayers do not provide any favourable solution. When a new priest arrives at the vicarage, he does not "want me [the boy] to make myself too conspicuous at church" (Kosinski 1965: 129) since he fears severe reprisals on the Germans' side. Catholicism was also used by the peasants as a means for attacking him. Being an altar boy, "whenever the priest looked away, the other boys tripped me up or poked me in the back" (Kosinski 1965: 136). And when the boy drops the missal and its tray during mass service, a male voice shouts "Gypsy vampire!" from a balcony and "several voices took up the chant".

The missal and its tray tumbled down the steps. An involuntary shout sprang from my throat. Almost simultaneously my head and shoulders struck against the floor. When I opened my eyes angry, red faces were bent over me. Rough hands tore me up from the floor and pulled me toward the doorway. The crowd parted in stupefaction. (Kosinski 1965: 138)

Finally, the boy is taken up by the Red Army, exposed to books and new ideas, and convinced that God and devils as well as heaven and hell are the product of his imagination. Furthermore, he is taught that they are used by the powerful ones to get

masses of people to do what they want. Then the boy feels he has been a complete fool for having believed in Catholicism as a way out. He thinks he is the one who is confused, “lost between curses and prayers, the tavern and the church, struggled through life alone, without help from either God or the Devil” (Kosinski 1965: 152) since “the belief in good, the power of prayer, altars, priests, and God had deprived me of my speech. [...] Now I would join those who were helped by the Evil ones” (Kosinski 1965: 154).

With no God, the protagonist realizes that each man creates his own moral values, and whatever his actions, they are justified because he is following his own convictions. Gavrila, a German leader, has taught him that “people themselves determined the course of their lives and were the only masters of their destinies” (Kosinski 1965: 187) and the boy feels that “Gavrila’s lessons filled me with new confidence” (Kosinski 1965: 191). The boy also meets Mitka –his mentor and model– and he is firmly convinced that the best reality is that of the Communist Party since its members are capable of knowing what is best for the masses. He is amazed at what Mitka does –killing three men in a village from up a tree– but the boy justifies Mitka’s action because he is superior, a member of the Party. Revenge is justified and we see that cruelty still exists, though it has changed its form.

How I envied Mitka! I suddenly understood a good deal of what one of the soldiers had said in a discussion with him. Human being, he said is a proud name. Man carries in himself his own private war, which he has to wage, win or lose, himself –his own justice, which is his alone to administer. [...] There was another element in Mitka’s revenge. A man, no matter how popular and admired, lives mainly with himself.

I also understood something else. There were many paths and many ascents leading to the summit. But one could also reach the summit alone, with the help at most of a single friend, the way Mitka and I climbed the tree. (Kosinski 1965: 206)

Towards the end of the novel, the boy’s moral character is far from having gone ‘in the right direction’. He is a survivor –a person of cold temperament, cruel and indifferent to other people’s suffering, even to his own parents and his newly adopted brother, when they finally come for him–. He says that the man and the woman seem “somehow familiar. [...] I didn’t know what to do; admit that I recognized them or pretend that I didn’t? I hesitated whether to expose it [his birthmark]. If I did everything would be lost; there would be no doubt that I was their son” (Kosinski 1965: 226). Besides, he knows that rejoining his parents will change his life completely since Gavrila has told him that parents have a right to their children. He thinks of his “dreams of becoming a great inventor of fuses for changing people’s colour, of working in the land of Gavrila and Mitka, where today was already tomorrow” (Kosinski 1965: 226).

As regards speech, silence is the preferred response to extreme grief, as pain is a way of surviving. To remain silent is to be very good, implying that speech is negative, guilt-producing behaviour. To further dramatize the theme of language, the novel contains

no dialogue; it is presented entirely in narrative form and the narrator is mute throughout much of the book. He loses his voice in a climactic scene when some villagers throw him into a pit of excrement after, as an altar boy, he has dropped the missal. He wants “to cry and beg for mercy, but no sound came from my throat. I tried once more. There was no voice in me” (Kosinski 1965: 138). “I had no voice” (Kosinski 1965: 139).

Though silence has been of great importance for the boy’s survival, the moment at the end of the book when the boy regains his speech is equally memorable. The boy is living at the mountains and when he knows that there is somebody who wants to talk with him, he feels

An overpowering desire to speak. I opened my mouth and strained. Sounds crawled up my throat. Tense and concentrated I started to arrange them into syllables and words. [...] The voice lost in a faraway village church had found me again and filled the whole room. [...] convincing myself again and again and again that speech was now mine and that it did not intend to escape through the door which opened onto the balcony. (Kosinski 1965: 234)

The most shocking side of this complex book is the utter absence of moral values. Reality is turned upside down since we find that cruelty is made understandable, love is perverted, and there is no distinction between man and beast—both are often confused, each taking on the qualities of the other, and even no difference is made between animals and humans copulating, as the scene in which Makar, a villager, and his son and daughter have intercourse with goats—.

When Makar came home after a successful sale, both he and his son would get drunk and go to the goats’ quarters. Ewka used to hint maliciously that they were enjoying themselves in there. (Kosinski 1965: 145)
Soon Ewka came into the room, huddled in a sheet. [...] Ewka tossed off her sheet and, to my horror, naked she slipped under the goat, clinging to it as though it were a man. Now and then Makar pushed her aside and excited the animal still more. [...] Something collapsed inside me. (Kosinski 1965: 151)

In spite of having to rely on others to learn about life, the boy feels that each of the persons he has met has had something different to teach him. A concept that gets clearly into his mind is that violence, or else power and control through violence, is a way of surviving in a reality that is too difficult to endure. His heroes are always people who are in control—the priest, the Russian Mitka, Gavrila—and who establish some kind of order to such chaos. Similarly, he exerts control over his own parents by showing he is undecided whether to go home with them or to run away. But he feels “some inner force” which is “pulling towards his kind” (Kosinski 1965: 227), the same as the painted bird, when mothers says that “I would be happy with her and my father, that I could do anything I wanted” (Kosinski 1965: 227). The boy decides to walk “between my parents,

feeling their hands on my shoulders and hair, feeling smothered by their love and protection” (Kosinski 1965: 228).

The Painted Bird suggests that the Nazis were not the only villains of the Holocaust, but that many people happily aided with the genocide. It gives us an account of the internal facts of a country –Poland– where villagers played a major role in ethnic extermination as well, by perpetuating Hitler’s hate. Moreover, through the mind of a child, we have a panorama of all the myriad of ideas that were floating around at that time. It is through the boy’s suffering, his joys and his bitterness that we find ourselves transported into the innocent mind and helpless young body of the protagonist that makes the story so hard to endure. Kosinski’s graphic, realistic depiction of what humans are capable of is, in some way, compensated at the end of the story. The boy’s survival in a senselessly brutal world brings about a rewarding sense of hope: he has found a safe place to be –the mountains– and has recovered his speech. Everything seems to be getting ‘in the right direction’.

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