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DECODING DECODED SYSTEMS: AN INTERPRETATION OF STEVEN MILLHAUSER'S "IN THE PENNY ARCADE"

In his *Untying the Text* Robert Young surmises that Roland Barthes' codes of reading operate as "associative fields, a supra-textual organization of notations which impose a certain idea of structure" (Young 134). Barthes distinguishes five codes of reading on the basis of which readers can identify and recognize certain elements in literary works , and can relate them to specific functions. The five codes are the following:

> The proairetic code controls the manner in which the reader constructs the plot of a literary work. The hermeneutic code involves problems of interpretation, particularly those questions and answers that are raised at the level of plot. The semic code is related to the textual elements which develop the reader's perception of literary characters. The symbolic code governs the reader's construction of symbolic meanings. The referential code is made up by textual references to cultural phenomena. (Hawthorn 20)

My assumption is that the aforementioned codes can only be differentiated arbitrarily, therefore in a literary work they are interrelated and they constitute different systems depending on the

reader's modes of critical understanding which is "undermined by a family of metaphors to which we continue to cling with obsessive tenacity" (Stevick 192). As implied by the title of my paper, system to me does not mean THE system of a literary work, or a unified system, but the recuperation of the codes mentioned earlier. I definitely try to avoid the word "structure", since it "carries with it connotations of economy, symmetry, accountable proportion, organic form" (199).

My paper aims to analyze and trace the organization of some elements related to particular functions in Steven Millhauser's short story "In the Penny Arcade" which was published in a collection of stories under the same title; and to list Barthes' codes in order to assemble systems of interpretations.

In the title I used the term "decoded systems" because the starting point to me is not the code system as it is but the text, and I do not wish to impose the principles of these codes upon the text but to trace the elements of the story as they appear in the text as the text decodes itself.

1. The proairetic code

The title of the short story seems to determine the setting, the penny arcade, which can be a mysterious place where one can waste his time and money, or a place of wonders for children, or a place which artificially creates and sustains the atmosphere of hope. The greatest attraction of the arcade is that one can buy hopes in there. The title being the first element influencing the reader's attitude to the plot can raise tension by immediately moving into metaphor.

The first sentence contains the division of light and dark, which dominates the whole story. The boy's motion shifts from light into dark by stepping into the arcade and this shift brings about another change which is in the time perspective of the plot. Even in the first two sentences the linear arrangement of events is broken, because the second sentence refers to an event which had happened before the boy entered the arcade. Later on the same method recurs all through the story. Sentences are said in the past tense, and the past perfect tense

alludes to events that happened earlier. Thus the reader is forced to jump to and fro in time if he wants to make out the linear sequence of the plot. From the reader's point of view the textual present comprises the past tense, and the reconstructed past is comprehended through the past perfect.

Still examining the first sentence one could interpret the boy's motion from "August sunshine" into "the shadows of the penny arcade" (Millhauser 135) as the boy's intention to hide away from the heat and relax in the shade, or as the first step, or as the initiative to start the voyage of discovery into the unknown. The word "shadow" implies something mysterious and unknown into which the boy starts his quest, and the plot of the story could be devoted to the obstacles he has to overcome during his voyage, thus at the end of the quest he is expected to achieve the precious aim, or is supposed to develop as a character through his experiences, and to attain a better awareness of his condition. The connotations of certain words also invite the reader into the world of mysteries, "the world seemed hushed and expectant, as if on the verge of revealing an overwhelming secret" (135).

This interpretation could be linked to the aforementioned symbolic code and hermeneutic code as well, and is reinforced by the mother's anxiety. The message of her anxiousness to the reader is that there is something concealed, and her behavior arouses curiosity. Furthermore, her attitude to her son entering the arcade supports the interpretation of the story on the quest motif level, which can even be traced back in time to King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, who started their quest for the non-existent Holy Grail.

The failure of this interpretation is that almost any story could be pressed into the quest-motif mould. The quest motif both can and cannot be applied to this story depending on which aspect of the quest motif is emphasized, and on what one thinks the essence of this motif is, if there is such a thing at all. For example, in Myths and Motifs in Literature the following definition is provided:

> The quest motif stresses less the journeying than the sought-after results of that journey. The goal of the quest is the lost

> treasure of innocence, which may be symbolized in various tangible and intangible ways. Ultimately though, the quest hopes to find the self through uniting the conscious with the unconscious. (Burrows 135)

Applying this definition to Millhauser's story would be misleading because the so-called "sought-after result" is of minor importance and the author rather stresses the journey itself, which, again, is by far not the journey of the hero growing into maturity from immaturity. Moreover, the precious aim is negligible because the boy neither serves any precious cause nor seeks anything rewarding, "It was not prizes I had come out of the sun for. It was something else I had come for, something mysterious and elusive that I could scarcely name" (Millhauser 136). The main emphasis falls onto the uneasy process of the search itself, the boy "went off in search of richer adventures" (137).

If there was a well-defined aim the boy was seeking, the reader would concentrate on the aim and not the process. However, obtaining the thing, or achieving the aim would kill the reader's curiosity, uneasiness and the point of the story which is the "wisdom of uncertainty" (Kundera 17). Answers kill questions; certainty is the death of uncertainty, as the sunlight in the arcade is the death of the mystery clinging to darkness.

2. The hermeneutic code

If one conceives plot by defining it as the recollection of events that happen in a story, then one might say that in this story a boy goes into the penny arcade, stays there for a while and comes out through the entrance. The sequence of trivial events like this does not seem to reveal much about the complexity of the text, however, the final act sheds light onto an important aspect of the story. The boy leaves the place through the entrance and not the exit, so the final element of formal structure which is supposed to be the resolution could be the beginning, or the exposition here of another story.

The story offers several traps to those readers who look for a revelation in it. What a relief it is to those readers who want to sort out all the elements of the plot and to make sense of the story, when they come across the following sentence, "All at once I had understood the secret of the penny arcade" (Millhauser 144).

At least two factors could annoy the complacent reader. On the one hand the past perfect tense shows that he had realized why he had had the strange feelings in the penny arcade before he told us the story, so the revelation to him does not come along with the reader's unfolding the secret while reading the story.

On the other hand if one was to unravel the plot in the linear sequence, the boy should have left the arcade through the exit, which would have meant closing the story and having an end to it. Here the exit and the entrance are the one and the same, which underlines both the lack of an end to the story and the way the author combines, welds and melts contrasts together.

The emphasis on the process without the end-result recurs in the story as the boy is thrown into various situations and watches varied activities without experiencing the end. He catches sight of the old fortune-teller but does not want to have her predict anything to him because feeling betrayed he leaves her. Or in another situation he watches a woman struggling with her several layers of clothing, and the description of this scene focuses on depicting the process of taking off the pieces one by one, and before the climax the boy is drawn into another situation, "I felt a melting languor, a feverish melancholy, until I knew that at any moment—'Hey!' I tore my face away. A boy in a yellow T-shirt was shouting at his friend" (143).

The expected achievement of the climax never comes, "I waited for something to happen, for some unspoken promise to be fulfilled, but all at once the movie ended" (139), and the scene again results in disillusionment. The story constantly turns back and repeats its complication without reaching the climax. So the emphasis is laid on the process towards the climax and not on the climax itself.

In one of his essays Philip Stevick compares Jean Stafford's "A Country Love Song" and three new fictions, namely texts by Barthelme, Brautigan and Coover, with the recent past. If I compare Millhauser's story to the criteria provided by Stevick I must surmise that in spite of the novelty which definitely lies in the text more elements of the Millhauser text coincide with the so-called "modernist" Stafford passage than with those of the texts from new fictions.

What are the common elements? Millhauser's story like Stafford's projects the reader "into a world of waiting, expecting" (Stevick 194), and after the first long paragraph the reader is mesmerized. In both stories decay and disintegration are central elements, and the torpor and the blight of the present are juxtaposed to past memories, even to the implication of reminiscent past value judgments which attach certain dignity to the past (195). The shoddy present is often contrasted with the past through the "as if" clause, which "seems to imply that the empirical reality being described is rather bizarre, sufficiently unfamiliar so that some conjectural cause must be supplied to account whimsically for its being so bizarre" (198).

Furthermore, at the end of Millhauser's story the narrator offers an epiphanic insight, a sort of unraveling and unfolding as he claims that he knows the truth and understands the secret of the penny arcade, "For this was the only penny arcade, the true penny arcade. There was no other" (Millhauser 145).

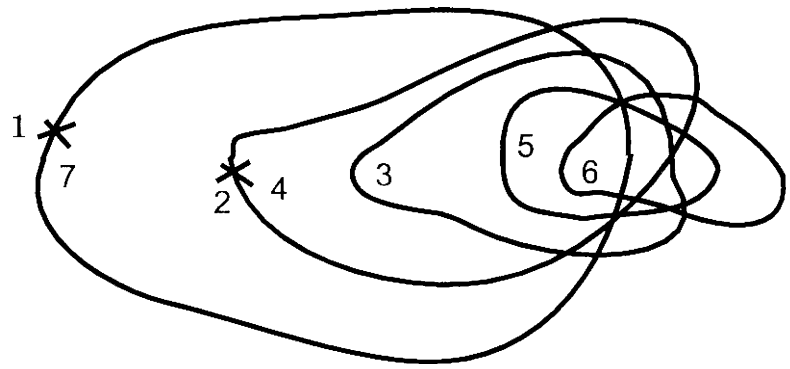
Refering back to the part in which I mentioned the novelty of Millhauser's story, and following Stevick's analysis I conclude that the story bears a lot of common elements with the new fictions as well. While reading the text the reader is in a state of uncertainty from the beginning as the penny arcade itself can be a metaphor with several ramifications. This uncertainty creates tension evoked by the lexical, syntactical and semantical structures generated in the text. Another common element is the way the story centers around the problem of "fascination with the junk of our culture" (Stevick 195).

In Stevick's article another principle of interpreting fiction in two distinct ways comprises approaches to open and closed spaces, or

exteriors and interiors. With regards to this division, the function of the places—like the recesses, the alcoves and the corners the boy wanders about—that appear in Millhauser's text are much closer to new fiction as "the physical space that encloses the consciousness of the action is undefined, nonspecific, in some vaguely hallucinatory way, or extreme, artificially constricted perhaps, or unaccountably open, or visionary, in which the contours of physical space are heavily shaped by the experiencing mind" (197—198).

3. The semic code

The concept one has about the characters is influenced by the way they appear in the text. The reader meets the twelve-year-old narrator in the first sentence, however, step by step several other layers of narration are revealed. The following chart shows the multi-layered narrative in the light of characters' perspectives.



The numbers denote the following: the reader (1) immerses into the text in which he learns about the characters. As he is culturally oriented towards the text and he is a different reader at each time of the reading activity, his interpretation of the story differs from time to time, so (7) which is the everchanging interaction between reader and text is an alternating lump. The narrator (2) views the experiences of the twelve-year-old boy at hindsight.

Lump (4) is the narrator's interpretation which is static compared to (7). The twelve-year-old boy's retrospect views (3) cluster around two time levels. On the one hand they comprise events that happened right before entering the penny arcade on his twelfth birthday (5), and on the other hand they contain reminescences from his earlier experiences (6). Lumps (4), (3), (5) and (6) are static in themselves but they always change within (7).

A subtle shift in the narrative voice expresses the resilience in the narrative voice of the twelve-year-old narrator and that of the narrator when the latter surmises that "for a moment I was tempted by the derrick, but at once despised my childishness and continued on my way" (Millhauser 136). In this sentence the child neglects his childishness, which is more like an utterance by the narrator than by the twelve-year-old boy.

Observing the other characters who are "constructs, types, quite deliberately devoid of much inner life" (Stevick 201) I assume that the clear-cut dividing line between characters and objects is blurred as human qualities and appearances are attached to objects, and human beings also share features common with objects. The two exceptions could be the mother and the father who show some feelings towards the child.

The gamblers inside the arcade form a communion with the machines. At first they seem to have control over the machines, but they are attracted to them with such fanatism and mania that the controler cannot be separated, or distinguished from the controled. Their fanatic longing for playing confirms that the machines have power over them. In fact, unlike people, machines appear to be more illuminating and to be full of exhilaration, and people's ennui and disinfatuation are contrasted with the novelty, elation and euphoria of machines, "A tall muscular teenager with a blond crewcut and sullen gray eyes stood bent over a pinball machine that showed luminous Hawaiian girls" (Millhauser 136). This teenager looks and behaves very much like the fake cowboy whose voice is similar to a human being's,

"Suddenly someone began to speak; I looked quickly about, but the voice came from the cowboy's stomach" (137).

Even machines can act and speak like human beings do, and the world of objects can easily be mistaken for the world of humans, if it is possible to differentiate the two at all. Anything and anybody can fit into the homogeneous mass of objects and humans by becoming "tough, dangerous, and inconspicuous" (136).

The fortune teller, who is supposed to unravel the mysteries of the future and kill the uncertainty which lies in the future, looms against the eye like a fading object, or an obsolete piece of machinery, "A crack showed in the side of her nose. Her one good eye had a vague and vacant look, as if she had misplaced something and could no longer remember what it was" (137). The fortune teller's and later on the little men's unconvincingness is further emphasized by their physical isolation from the boy and their placement in glass cases.

Blurring the boundaries between objects and people continues when the boy visits the old machines that have a "melancholy look" (140) and suddenly their weariness pushes life into them. However, this weariness is only a fake imitation of the alertness the boy has in his memory about the machines, "The strange hush, the waking of the creatures from their wooden slumber, seemed dim and uncertain, as if it had taken place long ago" (144).

After accusing the machines of losing their originality and of falling into blight and torpor, the boy reveals that he recognized that he had "become part of the conspiracy of dullness" and he had "betrayed" (145) the penny arcade, so the two short paragraphs at the end of the story introduce a shift in tone. The final implication of the boy's statement is that in order to appreciate the vividness and liveliness of these machines one needs to be vigilant. The pathetic fallacy in the arcade is that the boy thinks the figures there are rigid and hollow imitations of themselves sunk into hush because he himself is in that mood as well, so he projects his feelings onto them.

4. The symbolic code

I have mentioned the boy's entering and walking in the penny arcade, which could be a symbol of quest which shifts between light and dark. The same idea is expressed in the title of the story. Penny originally meant a silver coin which can stand for something glittering, and arcade is a covered shadowy place which can symbolize darkness. The penny arcade is the place where the two—light and dark—unite. Another implication of penny is insignificant, and by following this meaning the title could refer to place of minor importance. Reading the story one might find sufficient evidence to argue for and against both interpretations.

The visual images of light and dark have their equivalents in space, in time and in feelings, too. The following list is an illustration to this point:

— some words that could be associated with light in the text: summer, sunshine, outside, brilliant, white, wide, sun,

— some words that could be associated with dark in the text: shadows, inside, shade, narrow, black.

This list is compiled from the beginning of the story because later on the simple division into light and dark becomes more complex. The visible, the known and the precise is opposed to the enchanting, the mysterious and the unknown, but Millhauser blends these entities and he does not reject the coexistence of the two groups, i.e. he uses the expression "enigmatic summer" (135), and the narrow sunlight penetrates into the dark arcade.

What darkness in the text does not mean is that it is frightening. Darkness is "enticing" (135) and the boy longs to investigate it, because he thinks that nothing is visible there and he can keep the mystery of the place. He is disappointed when realizing that the darkness inside is not dark enough because some rays of the sun illuminate the arcade. The illusion is destroyed and broken by the sun, and distortions become visible, in N. Sarraute's words, "the fact being, that these states resemble certain phenomena of modern physics which are so delicate and minute that even a ray of light falling on them

disturbs and deforms them" (Sarraute 90). The more realistic and the visible the world is the more deformed and distorted it becomes. As I mentioned it under the proairetic code, shedding light onto something provides the answers to our questions, and as the illusion is killed the mystery cannot be sustained any longer.

In order to preserve mystery the boy seeks a darker corner in the arcade where he discovers all the typical people and objects one might find in a place like that. At a symbolic level some of these objects can have ironic implications. For example the toy derrick which could be a symbol of gambling as a crane, but it might as well mean the symbol of death as a gallows.

If the reader follows the latter line, which can be argued for from the preceding context which is the following,

> Tough teenagers with hair slicked back on both sides stood huddled over the pinball machines. In their dangerous hair, rich with violence, I could see the deep lines made by their combs, like knife cuts in wood. I passed a glass case containing a yellow toy derrick..." (Millhauser 136)

Interestingly enough he will conclude that the derrick breaks and kills the childish illusions and dreams a few lines further on when the child despises his childishness.

5. The referential code

The penny arcade which is a place where one lets his hopes be exploited is a part of commercialized culture. The short story recollects all the elements of popular culture which means culture for the people in this case, and then stuffs them into a meatgrinder of the arcade out of which these elements flow like a distorted, confused and annoyingly, or at times funnily mixed mass. In this mass Millhauser establishes a perfect balance between innocence and irony, elation and defeat, sorcery and artifice, novelty and indifference, dream and disappointment, and recoil and wish.

The story is a marvellous and mocking blend of different genres containing elements of gothic stories; of cheap erotic romances; of the legendary strike-it-rich gambling hall culture of the Wild West, which penetrates into urban culture and by doing so it becomes inauthentic expressing the vanishing prospects of the author for creating serious art.

It would certainly be misleading to claim that the aforementioned elements could only be discussed under these five codes, and that there are no overlapping features of the codes. Barthes himself uses references to a variety of different other codes like "the metalinguistic code, the socio-ethnic code, the social code, the narrative code, the scientific code and the scientific deontological code" (Hawthorn 20).

All the ambiguities and ambivalences of the codes are embedded in the language itself, which is intelligible and easily reveals the uneasiness of the content. The language of the text immerses the reader into worlds of dazzling catachrestic visual images (brilliant white ticket booth, sunlight painted onto the dusty air, dangerous hair rich with violence, noble with venomous rancor, radiant with spite, fierce amusement), astounding sound effects (metallic whirrings, clank, clatter, hush, creak), and minutely depicted motions (plunge, prancing, slump, draw, grasp, struggle, huddle, trot, jerk, stagger). Polysemic words (derrick, prize, coiled, varmint, wisp) offer intricate crossroads in interpreting the story.

In the light of the code system this analysis tries to evince that Millhauser's story does not want to become experimental at all costs, but the elements of the story form a medley of worlds that are not accessible to straightforward imagination. These worlds fuse such seemingly contradictory notions as refinement and distortion, negation and vindication, delight in fluency and transformation to scepticism. The reader is fascinated by that quality of the story which is so wonderfully expressed by the oxymoron "dark glittering" (Millhauser 139).

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