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## The spectacular world. Translation and Interpretation in *Scarred Hearts* by M. Blecher

**Abstract:** Within the context of the spectacular world that I investigated in M. Blecher's first novel (*Occurrences in the Immediate Irrreality*, 1936), I discuss about surrealism, oneirism, and realism, about the relationship and at the same time fragile border between reality and irreality, and also about translation and interpretation in art by taking into consideration Radu Jude's movie and Radu Afrim's theatrical performance, *Scarred Hearts*. Firstly, the director "translates" the play, by turning it into his own script that has to tell us a message in the present. Secondly, he "interprets" it by turning it into the spectacular construct. This is, of course, the ideal case.

**Keywords:** Translation, interpretation, irreality, surrealism, oneirism, spectacular world, *Scarred Hearts*, M. Blecher, Radu Afrim, Radu Jude

### 1. Translation, interpretation, and irreality.

#### Translation *versus* Interpretation? A book, a theatrical performance, and a movie: *Scarred Hearts*

In the first place, my intention was to formulate a strong thesis in terms of artistic translation *versus* artistic interpretation by considering the strong aesthetical opposition between realism and surrealism. Apparently, translation would refer to the realistic movie while interpretation refers to the surrealist theatrical performance. But Radu Jude's movie is realistic and at the same time an interpretation of M. Blecher's surrealist writings (an abridgement), while Radu Afrim's theatrical performance is a magically realistic interpretation, and at the same time a surrealist translation of M. Blecher's novel *Scarred Hearts*. I am not sure that such a strong thesis that opposes, on the one hand, translation to interpretation, and, on the other hand, realism to surrealism can be sustained because translation and interpretation do not differ in the same way in which realism and surrealism do. Furthermore, it is not justifiable to associate translation with realism or interpretation with surrealism.

If the concept of *translation* is opposed to the concept of *interpretation*, it is only a methodological way of speaking about art, be it a theatrical performance or a movie, because I do not use the term *translation* in its most

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common and frequent sense, i.e. translating a text from one language to another. Obviously, it is not the case of M. Blecher as he wrote in Romanian, and I read his novels in Romanian. Incidentally, Radu Jude had his script translated, as well as the lines that conclude the key moments of the film, but it was for the movie to be understood by an international audience, and I am sure that there is no difference when it comes to interpreting the movie; even if the lines are in English or in Romanian, there is no effect whatsoever upon the interpreting of the movie as an aesthetical product, on the constitutive situations, or on the way the characters are built. Of course, other cases than translating a text into a work of art could be considered, such as translating the aesthetical *language* of the work of art into words; in this case, the mission of the art critic, unsatisfied with the aesthetical experience as such, is quite against the collar most of the times.

Moreover, the Greek verb *hermeneuein* has three meanings: to express, to explain, and to translate (Palmer 1969, 13). In fact, the hermeneutical approach and the activity of translating are not at all contradictory: in a particular sense, to interpret is to translate, and *interpretation* is not the opposite of *translation*. When one translates something (a text, a work of art, or a reality by converting it into art), which is when one interprets something, according to the third meaning of the term *hermeneuein*, there is an obvious contrast between the universe of that which is to be interpreted and the universe of the reader, spectator, or interpreter. The spectator as interpreter and the artist are not in the same boat. The artist (in our case, the director of the movie or that of the theatrical performance) translates a reality or a text by converting it into images, sensations, and feelings. Then the spectator as an interpreter comes along with an interpretation of the work of art, which reflects the way he/she situates himself/herself within the interval between the universe of the text and the universe of the artist. The spectator carries along his/her own cultural presuppositions which may contribute in one way or another to the receiving of the work of art.

Theatre is a live art which has the advantage of being continuously changed depending on linguistic, historical, or other kinds of human presuppositions, while a movie, in the same way as a book or a visual art piece (such as a painting, a sculpture etc.) remains as such, unchanged once it is launched for the public or for the big audience. Therefore, translating from one language to another (interpreting the universe of the work of art) is more difficult in the case of a theatrical performance than in the case of a movie. As an exception, we may mention the literal meaning of the translation (from one language to another), when the translator has to mediate between the linguistic context of the text and that of the reader. But, as I have already mentioned, it is not the case to enter into issues of pure translatology. When it comes to translating or interpreting a work of art, there are two main instances involved in the process, apart from the

creator: the universe of the piece of art and the universe of the spectator or interpreter. A whole made up of text (words), images, music, special effects, and emotions reflects a certain way of seeing the world which, by the acts of watching/seeing/hearing, meets a completely different world – the horizon of the receiver. Because the spectator does not go *tabula rasa* to the theatre or to see a movie, but he/she already has his/her own cultural luggage which shape his/her way of thinking, of seeing things, and of acting, and at the same time awakens aesthetical experiences of one kind or another. The meaning of the show does not reside within the words of the text or the images as such, but it is arisen within the interval mediating between the work of art and the spectator.

The scope and objective of the interpretation, including translation, is to understand a work of art. We fully understand a work of art when our horizon (our way of conceiving the world of art) meets the horizon of the work of art itself, and when the work of art starts to speak our language, and addresses our innermost questions and expectations. Therefore, abridgements are welcome as long as they transpose the world of the play into our present world. Some believe there are eternal and universal playwrights whose texts are sacred and not to be changed by the director. The director himself/herself is an artist whose main task is to address to the spectator of his/her times. He/she works against the myths and the idols of the theatre by an attempt of *demythologizing*. Along with this line of thought I would like to mention the way that Palmer defines translation: it is about bringing “what is strange, unfamiliar, and obscure in its meaning into something meaningful that ‘speaks our language’.” (Palmer 1969, 29). First, the director translates the play, by turning it into his/her own script that has to tell us a message in the present, and then he/she interprets it by turning it into the spectacular construct. This is, of course, the ideal case.

What is irreality? When it comes to irreality, do we translate or do we interpret? In my opinion, irreality is close to fiction, to art (as long as art is not a mirroring of reality), and to exacerbated perceptions or emotions. Irreality cannot be translated. Neither can irreality be interpreted according to the *I-you* pattern (the in-between of the two horizons) conferred by the dialogical model. Irreality cannot but absorb one entirely within the universe that the author advances. It is the case of M. Blecher’s first novel (1936), entitled *Întâmplări în irealitatea imediată* (I have found two versions of the title in English, *Adventures in Immediate Irreality* or *Occurrence in Immediate Unreality*, but many other possibilities can be taken into consideration).

The title is very suggestive, controversial and paradoxical at the same time, as it reunites terms that have to do with happenings/facts/events or with immediate/unmediated experiences, with the term *irreality* that has to do with oneirism, surrealism, and dreamlike experiences. I prefer the term *irreality* to *unreality* because irreality exists as surreality, and it is the true authentic reality of the narrator, while *unreality* simply opposes *reality*, as a

negation of it. If we can say that reality is something, unreality cannot be conceived of being anything else but a logical negation of reality. We cannot speak of Blecher's unreality, because there is nothing to say about that which is not; instead, Blecher's novel is a very detailed description of his own irreality. The word *adventures* is a fortunate one as long as we understand a purely subjective experience, and an emotional redimensioning of the events and happenings of the narrator's life by it. The word *occurrence* is extremely fortunate not as much for its meanings as happening, event, episode, incident, but because of its meaning in the present: something that happens; it happens to Blecher as the narratorial voice, because it may have happened to Blecher as a human being and author, but it certainly happens to the reader.

Usually, we tend to consider that we translate/transpose facts into stories and that we interpret the respective fictions. In Blecher's case, interpretation represents the subjective recreation of the world (in terms of a feeling of complete usefulness of the world, like that of a burden, melancholy, neurosis, cynicism, the absence of any meaning of life, the absence of the belief in miracles etc.). Our reading makes us captive within this surrealistic and extremely subjective world. Perhaps, it is Blecher's way to live on through the situations created by words and images in the mind of the reader, as one of my students put it.

As an author, Blecher talks a lot about interpretation. I found references, multiple using of the term *interpretation*, and even impulses to define and explicit it. He also refers to meaning, sense, significance, painting, photography etc., when trying to explain or interpret his subjective experiences, starting from events that are real for the narrator, but may be their transposing into a novel, having an author that is distinct from the first person narrator. The subjective world of the narrator (from childhood, through adolescence to adulthood) becomes the recreating of the world from the point of view of his extremely subjective and exacerbated sensations and emotions. The author meditates upon interpretation as an archaeology of subjective sensations and feelings (e.g. the objects recall subjective emotions and evoke images, Blecher 1936, 59 & 61), as an invention or reinvention of reality (Blecher 1936, 67), as the deciphering of some oneiric and surrealist scenario (Blecher 1936, 52). If hermeneutics is about interpretation in order to understand, as I have stated earlier, for Blecher one does not interpret in order to understand, but in order to invent and continuously reinvent reality from a subjective perspective.

## **2. The theatrical character of the world in Blecher's first novel**

*Adventures in Immediate Irreality* or *Occurrence in Immediate Unreality* is a theatrical novel. The expression was used by Mihail Bulgakov for the title of his unfinished novel about theatre where he satirizes Konstantin Stanislavski.

Independently of Bulgakov's sense of the expression, I consider Blecher's first novel to be theatrical because the characters are constructed in a theatrical manner and the situations are easily visualized. It appears as if he gives stage directions because of his style of writing. Blecher's *true reality* as irreality (Blecher 1936, 62), unreality, or surreality is reconstructed in his emotional imagination by exploring and transfiguring memories. To Blecher the world is but a scenario, a stage, a spectacle, a fair, a cinema, a wax museum, a shop window, a game, and a nightmare.

*The scenario.* The whole book is a surrealist and oneiric scenario. I chose a particular scenario as an illustration of the whole: the dream of the headless woman (Blecher 1936, 110-112). His life resembles an oneiric scenario that he tries to escape aspiring to get rid of the nightmare (in 1928, Blecher was diagnosed with spinal tuberculosis, and he lived in the proximity of death until his early disappearance at the age of 29).

*The stage.* Part of the scenario is the moment when he finds recreation in the theatre hall, precisely under the stage. He passes through all the almost initiatic places from the theatre entrance to a magical place under the stage. There, he felt liberated from all his burdens, worries, and suffering, as he managed to find pleasant and hopeful solitariness in a hidden "neutral place where he was not to be reached" (Blecher 1936, 99-102).

*The spectacle of life.* Blecher sees the objects around him as part of some theatre decor or setting: "The theatrical impression followed me everywhere and it came accompanied by the feeling that everything evolves within an artificial and sad spectacle" (Blecher 1936, 63). Life itself dilutes to the effect of some stage scenery. Within the spectacle of life (the *spectacular world*), the *actors* should play emphatically and falsely.

*The fair.* The august fair with its kitsch atmosphere contributes to the spectacle of life with its distorted images and exacerbated sensations. (Blecher 1936, 70-75).

*The cinema.* The movies that the first person narrator saw are the perfect pretext to escape bare reality. Somehow, as I have already suggested, the narrator is most of the times, perhaps not always, Blecher himself. As "there is no well-established difference between our real self and the interior and imaginative characters within ourselves" (Blecher 1936, 64), I tend to believe that the border between the narrator and the author is very undiscernibly fragile. The cinema, the fair and the wax museum experiences are part of the same view on the world as a spectacle: "One day the cinema caught fire. The film tore and immediately went up in flames, which for several seconds appeared on the screen like sort of a truly warning that the place was on fire as well as a logical continuation of the device's mission to give the breaking news, a mission that made it, through an excess of perfection, render the most recent and the most exciting event in the present: its own conflagration." (Blecher 1936, 65). Watching movie after

movie at the cinema from dawn to wane made the world look even more spectacular. Even the sunset is perceived as a theatrical effect that the world is directed to represent. The narrator feels as if he were living in an irreality composed of distorted images, at the same time detached from the ordinary people fretting around, truly believing in their real world made of everyday occupations and small feelings that they took so seriously.

*The wax museum.* The wax museum is another illustration of the spectacular world reconstructed by M. Blecher. It is associated with the odd feeling of a *déjà-vu* absurd decor. The irreality of the wax museum with its wax characters “ostensively made life seem fake” (Blecher 1936, 67). Blecher cannot stop his morbid thought that the narrator’s body could become a wax figure in the wax museum, while the author spends his life watching it. Reality and irreality interweave and eventually change places with one another: all the pathetic props in the museum suggest more tragic than any real death. The wax characters and the wax world were the only authentic ones. Yet, if anything is artificial or kitsch in life, it was borrowed from the wax museum. The image of the wax bride in the crystal box anticipates Edda’s death (if Clara is the woman who awoke the narrator to spring, Edda is his secretly admired one). He sees the funeral as a “simple lace of things” (Blecher 1936, 132), as if stage props were being manipulated in a ritualised manner and in succession, without any feelings (such as real pain) or deeper meanings.

*The shop window.* The narrator watches a blue and red clown in a toyshop window. The mechanical movements of the toy are a moment of bliss, having a cathartical effect on his agitated mind. The experience almost makes him cry, and he feels purified in a most simple and authentic way (the words that he uses are “immaculate”/“spotless”, “cool”/“calmness”, and “beautiful”). He envies the clown and imagines himself changing places with it in the theatrical window undisturbed by reality (Blecher 1936, 119).

*The game.* The strange game invented by the narrator and played with some friend of his proves that people’s conversations are conventional, and that one can talk seriously about anything, including the unreal. Invented stories had to be taken seriously as if the irreality of the things caught inside words should not be revealed. (Blecher 1936, 77-78). Part of the game is the way reality turns into irreality and vice versa. Someone tells somebody else a story that the latter does not believe because the former seems to boast with another’s event. The author finds it appropriate to use the respective story in his novel as if it happened to the narrator. The author turns the unreality of the story into reality again (Blecher 1936, 103).

*The nightmare.* Blecher sees his live as a nightmare. The relation among awakesness, sleep and dream ends the novel in a subjective apocalyptic way: “I am awake, but I am sleeping and I am dreaming about my state of awakesness” (Blecher 1936, 135). It is about personal despair and longing for

another life, without the pain, and about the need for his *true reality*: “I agonize now within this reality, I scream; I beg to be awoken, to be awoken to another life, to my real life” (Blecher 1936, 135).

### 3. A theatrical movie by Radu Jude

Radu Jude’s movie *Scarred Hearts* (2016) is constructed in perfect harmony with M. Blecher’s conception of the spectacular world. The Romanian film and theatre director Radu Jude transposes Blecher’s perspective on irreality into his own fragmented narrativity. The dense descriptions, yet stylistically fragile of the book are turned into photographic and pictorial images in the movie. Although the director Radu Jude reinterprets Blecher’s views on the theatrical world, his intelligent script is a translation in the sense that he imposes his own views on the subjects, keeping what seems crucial, adding or cutting in accordance with his own cultural interests. As any translator, Radu Jude is a traitor (*traduttore, traditore*), but for the best of all interests: Blecher becomes very actual, as the movie speaks to us in the terms of the present days. Actually, Jude’s theatrical movie is made in the spirit of the author.

In Blecher’s second novel (1937), the image of the world as a morbid farce is present all along; the author talks about emphatic or theatrical attitudes, about living puppets, about decor, about some “director of the neat yet hallucinant spectacle” (Blecher 1937, 63) the main character is living, about the ill people who lost their identity deep inside their rigid corporeality, and now all their everyday activities seemed a “ridiculously fake and useless setup” (Blecher 1937, 80) as if they were playing a grotesque part in the spectacular world. Also, he mentions the “comedy” that a man in love creates and his clownish behaviour (Blecher 1937, 94-95) (a funny situation intercalated within the general turmoil, pain, and torture).

The classical aspect of the film (squared, with rounded corners, in the middle of two black margins) gives it a retro and vintage flair (the AMPAS standard ratio in the 30s of 1.37:1). But what’s most important is that it offers the sensation of watching through a window to the spectator. Mostly, the action seems to be taking place within a world detached from the world of the audience. The two opposite directions of implication and distancing are originally to be found in Blecher when his subjective experiences simply swallow us up, but at the same time there is a spectacle of the world that sets the reader aloof, and the reader becomes an interpreter. Rarely, we get the privilege to look outside through the two windows that reflect the seasons that pass by (the windows are illuminated in an irreal, almost fantastic way when we can see the moon, the rain drops, the snowflakes, or just the frozen window). But as the two windows symmetrically enframe the bed, we actually look inside the situations from the outside.

In my opinion, the movie is an essay to recreated the irreality not as an immediate one (through subjective sensations and emotions), but by means of different instances of mediation, such as: mirrored reflections of faces or objects, even distorted mirror images (obtained by means of distorting mirrors), pictorial frames, photographic frames, or frames reproducing famous paintings. The internal world is always reflected within the external one in Radu Jude's movies; for this, he pays much attention to the lighting (e.g. the way it falls upon nature or the objects, or the way it is trapped and handled) and to recreating various sensations (including olfactory ones, which is extremely rare in films). When the mirror intermediates the human relationships, or when Emanuel tries to decipher what he has become (the interiority evaporated, while the extreme corporeal identity has remained like a burden), Jude catches the interval between the real and the oneiric by using images, props, and gestures, just as Blecher does by using words (Blecher 1937, 64).

The essay to recreate the irreality is doubled by realism. It is a documented movie, which begins and ends with elements, including photographs, from Blecher's biography (e.g. his manuscripts and his drawings). There are many references to personalities who influenced Blecher (e.g. George Bacovia or Emil Cioran). Sometimes the discourse becomes politically oriented (Hitlerism and nationalism are criticized; anti-Semitism is brought in a scene specially conceived on the purpose, the main character Emanuel being a Jew). Besides, I find it very useful that the director insists on explaining what *scarred hearts* mean: the ill people at the sanatorium felt so much pain that they became immune to it, and they do not feel anything anymore, as if their hearts were made of scarred tissue.

The scenes are multiply fragmented by key quotations from Blecher's writings (white on black); most of them conclude the moments, but some of the times they explain or anticipate them. It is a technique that works in theatre in order to create the link among the scenes, and Jude uses it in his theatrical movie. The setting is also very theatrical with a lot of retro props evoking the time when the action took place. The static frames also contribute to the theatrical character of the movie. Jude himself confesses that "theatre is a better model for abridgements than the classical cinema" (Europa FM 2016). He gives his own interpretation of Blecher's work by cutting passages or adding moments, renaming the sanatorium, taking out or renaming characters, whose characterizations are very schematic, enlarging Emanuel's experience with the experiences of other characters in the book, and generally by changing the nuances of the characters. He also reinterprets the love story between Emanuel and Solange. The actors play in a very theatrical way that may seem artificial for cinematography.



#### 4. A filmic theatrical performance by Radu Afrim

The Romanian theatre director Radu Afrim is also a translator and a traitor when interpreting Blecher's Scarred *Hearts* (Teatrul de Stat Constanta, 2006) with the sole difference that Jude is more realistic than him, while he is more inclined towards surrealism. Radu Afrim has the tendency to turn the novel into a scenario which reflects his own theatrical obsessions, in such a way that his own oneiric and surrealistic aesthetics takes over the aesthetics of the author himself. The atmosphere created by the theatre director Radu Afrim is actually a very blecherian one. Because I consider Blecher to be a surrealist, as well. Since Blecher is a surrealist, and Radu Afrim follows Blecher when creating the surreality, namingly the *irreality* expressed by Blecher's novel, surrealism becomes, as paradoxically as it may seem, a stronger reality than reality itself as reflected by realism or naturalism. Like a hyper reality reflecting the human condition.

Blecher's conception of the spectacular world turns into a lively, vibrant, ludic, frenzied, rapturous, and delirious show. The minimalist decor fully demonstrates that *less is more*, because instead of excessive ornamentation the spectator is offered sensations, emotions, and states of mind (essential props and stage effects, such as gramophones and miniature gramophones, or inventive abat-jours coming down from the ceiling, contribute to it). The director seems to understand the author not at least as well as he understood himself, but even better. Actually, surrealism and oneirism themselves are being translated into some kind of magical realism (the general atmosphere of the show, due to the lighting and sound effects). Blecher's subjective and sensorial descriptions are made into stage visual images (Afrim reads Blecher in a visual manner, and they have similar visions), or transposed into storytelling. Whole human situations or actions, as well as nature or the weather are conveyed by lines, in the monologues of the main character overlapping the same line spoken by some secondary character (perhaps, Emanuel as a child symbolically doubles Emanuel as an adult), or in dialogical situations when utterance doubles or replaces gesture.

Although it is not cinematic theatre, Afrim's tendency to create a filmic theatrical performance is more than obvious (video background projections along with text projections; dreamlike choreography; electrical associations among spoken and projected text, image, and sound, the projected text being one step ahead from the vocal expression that accompanies it; inspired changes of the stage lighting – white lighting for the realist moments, different semi-obscure illumination for the oneiric, surrealistic, or bizarre moments; the acting resembling that encountered in an art film; and the scenes tending to become frames in an uninterrupted continuous), wherein the scripted characters are strongly built, and at the same time brought to life, meaningly to the irreality, surreality or hyper reality of the

show (theatrical displays of grief, such as forced explosions of laughter out of the despair of the characters looking for their identity and human dignity lost within their plastered bodies; invasive attitudes because of past traumas in the eccentrically and so strongly built character of Eva, once a patient herself, now a nurse, to whom the director offers a generous “partiture” in his own scenario; and odd absent-mindedness when characters are built in an oneiric manner, like they were made of spider thread). The forced immobility of the characters trapped in wheel-beds is counter-balanced by twisted physicality, erotic gestures and pulsating stage movements. The line between agony and ecstasy is so fragile that the passing from joyfulness to sadness is juggled at the lightning speed.

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