

The Postmodern Cultural Context – from History to Economics

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Abstract: The main focus of our paper falls on outlining the manner in which starting with the 5th decade of the last century all the sectors of society experienced a transformation of vision, a change of perspective that led people to a more plurivalent view of the world, a discarding of almost all modern values, tenets and beliefs, and a movement towards a new life style and manner of thinking which meant the promoting of hybrid forms, the appearance of a double addressability to both the “high” and the “low” strata of society, the leap into a new type of (simulated) reality developed by the media (which popularised again double functions such as infotainment and increased man’s need to build himself as a mediagenic creature), the exhibiting of a new view of history that moved between rejection and re-evaluation, the development of consumerist society and of capitalist mentality. We have also tried to present a portrait of the way in which all these phenomena were circumscribed to the larger frame of the fragmented postmodernism at the turn of the millennium and observe whether or not the temporal border represents also a border towards a new trend. The paper also follows all these trends as they are applied in Malcolm Bradbury’s fictional work or as they are theorised upon in his critical work. We have tried to observe the manner in which his novels can be viewed as a portrait of the historical and cultural directions that the postmodern society crossed, the new mentality constituting simultaneously a cause and an effect of the new life style, the new *Zeitgeist*.

Introduction

Understanding the social, economic, and political context in which the new postmodern perspective emerged within society and within fictional or critical works is essential to the understanding of those very works. The decisions dictated by new social rules, rapid economic changes or deep political interests led to the appearance of a new pragmatic spirit which had as an only weapon sarcasm and irony. Each decade amplified these aspects and the defining ideology of a period translated into a new type of writing that debated insistently upon the contemporary issues of the fast moving society. Ideas became doctrines and dictated the practical spirit by which people led themselves. The new type of regarding history (or rather denying it) made the postmodern individual a creature engaged and sometimes lost in the contemporary whirlpool of technological discoveries, economic shifts and media power that made him take a new step (or perhaps several new steps) on the *sapiens* scale.

Marxism

The Marxists theories that visualised history as a natural process rooted in man's material needs and revealing the laws of capitalist development as part of general social evolution represent the basis that led to the development of the new modern society and seem to justify even the frenzy of the contemporary scientific, technical and economic progress. The struggle between classes over economic, social and political advantages (limited only by the mode of production that both qualifies a status and drives to change) has now shifted in the struggle between nations to acquire a more privileged position.

Postmodern fiction opposes many times nations on the basis of their power of development and class struggle has become now the struggle for the occupation of the market. Social revolution is now financial revolution and production is not the main drive of society but selling is. Postmodernity thrives on selling goods, knowledge, ideas and images and the new market commodities circulate at breathtaking speeds. Thus, we seem to close a loop which modernism had opened and from a beginning of stepping into the realm of freedom in modernism, we seem to be moving back to the realm of necessity. That is why we seem to have turned back to the Marxist tenet that it is not the consciousness of men which determines their existence but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness. We have become so socially disrooted and yet socially dependent that we respond to what is being served to us. We have become the new serfs to the new bourgeois class¹ of the ones that promote a "throw away" type of production only to make us consume more.

Another aspect which makes Marxism an underlying context for the development of modernism and later postmodernism is its rejection of history as the ultimate driving force in the society. But in Marx's theoretical system this was to be replaced by the empowering of each individual, in postmodernism the power is given to the governmental system which is, in its turn, subordinated to the entrepreneurial system. It is the business world that pulls the strings on the level of production, dictates decisions on the market and even at the political level. The new type of historical materialism is a political-entrepreneurial materialism which dictates on a global market.

By drawing these theories closer to the communist doctrine, Malcolm Bradbury rendered in his novels the influence of Marxists thinking in the development of peoples and the changes brought to it by the specific of a nation. The author approached the matter most of the times in a parodic manner and rendered the issue as a comic-absurdist enclosed system in which freedom was an illusion craftily designed. But for a supplementary discussion on the matter see the next chapter.

Communism

Communism was seen as "modernity's main model of opposition to capitalist economic and social organisation"², but it falls into the trap of outlining a society in which man is not seen as an individual anymore, but as a commodity whose labour is bought and sold on the markets. Bradbury emphasized in more of his works that communism was one of the two great ideological divides (the second being capitalism) that for an important period of time "structured the thinking, steered the consciousness, guided the mindset of a large part of the world." ("What Was Post-modernism?", p. 766)

It is for this reason probably that postmodern novelists such as Malcolm Bradbury chose for the topic of their novel the depiction, the customs and the social stirrings of such (ex)communist countries (it is the case of *Rates of Exchange* and *Why Come to Slaka?*, of half of *To the Hermitage* – the action taking place not only in Catherine the Great's past but in the present, as well the case of some episodes from *Dr. Criminale*). The basic feature of postmodernism that these novels do not disclaim is the parodic figuring of a society in which freedom is only apparent, disguised behind comically presented restrictions and prohibitions, a society in which freedom of movement is infinite but with a definite limit. Only *Dr Criminale* and more *To the Hermitage* seem to bring a sign of recognition at the cultural tradition that communist countries still preserve and, quite laudatory, are a picture of genuine realistic force.

Rates of Exchange is a humorous description of the People's republic of Slaka, a communist country on the Soviet orbit and a member of the Warsaw pact. The country acts as a genuine Museum of socialist real art, a picture of proletariat endeavour, a heroic achievement of socialist planning in the best of worlds. The true meaning of the novel unfolds when we realize that the people are just puppets, victims of the ever-present representatives of the secret services, and of a system in which one cannot trust anyone despite the total (Bradbury is ironic here) freedom and liberty of movement. Thus, Bradbury's aim is actually that of mocking at an absolutist system of thinking and governing because postmodernism could accept the myth of such a grand(iose) narrative. The author's sarcasm and incredulity towards such absolutist myths is obvious when presenting the way in which history is perceived in Slaka: "History is perceived as a dialectical progress, and not, as in decadent Western thought, as a sentimental past." (p. 3) The perspective is enlarged in *Why Come*

¹ Interpretation based on Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's work "Bourgeois and Proletarians" in Lawrence Cahoon (ed.) (2007): *From Modernism to Postmodernism. An Anthology*, expanded second edition, Blackwell Publishing, pp. 75–81.

² Simon Malpas (2005): *The Postmodern. The New Critical Idiom*, Taylor and Francis Group: Routledge, p. 108.

to *Slaka?*, an alleged guide-book for the visitors of Slaka which only deepens the feeling of oppression and the illusion of the reality they live.

But these types of novels are not only sarcastic constructions or bitter amendings of the communist countries and the system at work in them. They are also a backhanded message towards the West and an attempt to render the fact that the cultural discriminations are in fact more subtle than they seem, and while the surface structure may seem different, the deep structure is the same. After all did not Thatcherism have a trace of communism in it? And conclusively: "in Russia the smell is of food and cats. [...] In England of drink and dogs." (*Rates of Exchange*, p. 170) Bradbury's satire is not addressed exclusively at communist countries and their system of organization. It is simply an example because, just as the people of Slaka have three parties which are in fact one and the same – the Slakan's People Communist Party, the People's Slakan Communist Party and the Communist Slakan Communist Party – so Western countries pretend to have independent organizations and yet they are part of the same globalized system of contemporary pragmatism.

Totalitarianism – from history (in)to fiction

The new political and artistic aspect brought with it a repudiation of unitary, self-regulatory systems of totalitarianism. It is not univalence that is approved of and encouraged, promoted and practised, but a form of plurivalence (be it called diversity, eclecticism, collage, pastiche or otherwise). This is how some topics of debate in the field were censored (social formations, doctrinal systems) while others were endorsed (prisons, patriarchy, the body especially when thought of in abstract terms).

From the recognized historical forms of totalitarianism manifest in full modernist era (such as fascism), the world passed through (and is still experiencing in some countries) the communist dictatorship which levelled mentalities and forbade self-affirmation. The world experienced in these situations an act of violence against the alterity of the other having repressive consequences of exclusion. Ironically enough, under the unbeatable slogan that asserts the repetition of history, we are now experiencing a new global cultural totalitarianism or totalization disguised under a false liberty of choice and freedom of speech for "now we are in the modern age, when all people should feel equal to each other and everyone should be happy" as one of Bradbury's characters says. (*To the Hermitage*, p. 459) The new need for affirmation brought new types of policies in which the power of the individual or of an organized system made itself felt in new ways. The question arising now is connected to the normative aspect of such an age – what are the prescriptive phrases (laws) of such a period? Do they proclaim total freedom? Do they give complete power of manifestation to the individual and his desires? Or is he a slave to the economically designed society? The political aspect of totalitarianism has become in postmodernism more economically driven. Nations do not want now to conquest territories but markets, governments, driven (and financed) by big corporations which only want to submit people as consumers.

Such issues are frequently presented in postmodern novels which, in a reminiscence of the past, recreates (in a chronicle-like attitude or imaginarily) spaces in which people follow one "grand" ideology putting at work the entire sarcastic and ironic arsenal of the author. It is the case of many of Malcolm Bradbury's novels which are either entirely or partially set in such countries that face such issues of having to live under a totalitarian government or make references to such types of organizations

Another aspect of totalitarianism can be the narratological one. In literature too, totalitarianism has been subverted. In one of his letters gathered in *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, Jean-François Lyotard mentions the existence of a vicious circle: "y has authority over x because x authorises y to have it"³. As in any system of organization described above, in literature the author has authority over the reader because the reader allows it. But this exercising of power is contested in postmodernism, leading to a putsch, a coup d'état against the almighty author. Some have uninstated him, others have executed him. From this position he tried to win his status back from a standpoint which does not claim omniscience, but is either self-ironical or empathic with the reader. This is why he submits to the reader's desire and engages himself "to tell the entire and honest truth, as I know you always like me to." (*To the Hermitage*, p. 457) This is how we move from the autocracy of the creator to the dictatorship of the reader who seems to impose by his request the "most wanted" type of writing. It is in this equation that publishers and editors have become the true dictators through whose filters and Caudine forks writers have to pass and in whose Procrustean beds they have to fit.

Capitalism

Malcolm Bradbury's main character from *The History Man* predicts apocalyptically that "we are in a world of late capitalism, and capitalism is an over-ripe plum ready fall. It is cracking, bursting, from its inner contradictions" (p. 68) He may have been hasty in proclaiming such an early fall in 1967, but he does ask eventually the right question: "but who, from its fall, will benefit? How can the new world come?" (*id.*) Apparently more had to lose from the period and its end is not going to happen anywhere soon.

Capitalism, as issued by the Marxist doctrine, "is the most dynamic, revolutionary, transgressive social system known to history, one which melts away barriers, deconstructs oppositions, pitches diverse life-forms

³ J.-F. Lyotard (1992): *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982–1986*, Turnaround, p. 52.

promiscuously together and unleashes an infinity of desire.”⁴ Put like this capitalism seems to have surpassed modernism and seems to be equated with postmodernism and with its philosophy of change and cultural crossover, with its denunciation of unity and advocacy of a movement of translation, propensity for deconstructing matters, with bringing together of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture and with encouraging the individual towards freely expressing his desires.

The main shift that was observed in advanced capitalism is that it has moved from being perceived simply as an economic and cultural system based upon the disciplines necessary for production to being perceived as a system based on the pleasure on the consumption. The new philosophy of desire replaced the old necessity of achieving production, and the puritan ethic of work and conformity gave in to the cult of self-expression leading to a development of plural individualities. This was projected against the larger frame of a “pluralization of lifeworlds”⁵ which most of the times was seen as leading to a state of general anomie, a sense of uprootedness, of lack of purpose, identity or ethical values both in the person and in the society as a whole.

Simon Malpas sees capitalism as taking in those economic systems in which privately held finance is used for the production, purchase and consumption of goods, and [it] has been the basic economic model for a vast range of societies stretching back to the earliest cultures.⁶

Having at its origins man’s propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another, capitalism is both a reflection and a result of “the growth of industrial production, the expansion of markets and the employment of workers by businesses for wages rather than a share of the produce of their labour”⁷, in other words “a product of a developing bourgeois society.”⁸ The only disadvantage is a desubstantialisation of the human subject, a mercantilisation of one’s perspective upon life in which man masters nature but becomes enslaved to man, victories of sciences bring also loss of character and of affects, or the accomplishments of political art lead to sometimes drastic global decisions. One way or another, this perspective upon the world is important in the Marxist type of thinking for it is the subject’s position in relation to the economic structure of the society that produces identity. “How does one be a man among men now?” (p. 123) asks one of Bradbury’s characters in *Stepping Westward*. The answer is that one has to find his own ethics for he cannot do this by help of the social system which now only aims at pushing him and making him flow with the wave of the history of a capitalist society.

Other variables such as the dispersal and mobility of production (the variety of locations in which a product is assembled before being put on the market, or the commodification of information, services, images and life-styles) gave rise to one of the most elaborate descriptions of capitalism as a direct cause of and part of postmodernism made by Fredric Jameson. Taking his model of analysis from Ernest Mandel’s *Late Capitalism*, Jameson divides capitalism in three stages “each one marking a dialectical expansion over the previous stage”: *market capitalism* (marked by the process of machine production of steam-driven motors, by development of factories and workshops during the Industrial Revolution and by its aesthetic correspondent, realism, from the middle of the 19th century); *monopoly or imperialist capitalism* which gave rise to modernism (in the 90s of the 18th century marked by machine production of electric and combustion motors and by the growth of large-scale businesses); the current *late capitalism* corresponding to the era of multinational corporations and deregulated markets with no spatial trade barriers and the postmodern aesthetic⁹. A possible subdivision of late capitalism could be that of the prewar, Fordist capitalism of modernity and a postwar, post-Fordist postmodern capitalism.

Fredric Jameson describes this last stage as being marked by the emergence of new forms of business organisation [...] the new international division of labour, a vertiginous new dynamic in international banking and the stock exchanges [...], new forms of media interrelationship, [...] computers and automation, the flight of production.¹⁰

Jameson also terms the last stage of this description “multinational capitalism”, “spectacle or image society”, “media capitalism”, “the world system”, and even “postmodernism”. At the same time, he discards the use of terms such as “poststructuralism” and “postindustrial society” and considers them unsatisfactory on account of their rigidity and restriction given by the bearing of their mark of the area of provenance. “Postmodern”, on the other hand “seems to have been able to welcome in the appropriate areas of daily life or the quotidian; its cultural resonance, appropriately vaster than the mere aesthetic or artistic, distracts suitably from the economic while allowing newer economic materials and innovations to be recatalogued under the new heading.”¹¹ So, in Jameson’s opinion postmodernism, synonymous with late capitalism is, despite the

⁴ Terry Eagleton (1996/ 2007): *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Blackwell Publishing, p. 61.

⁵ David Lyon (1999): *Postmodernity*, second edition, Open University Press, p. 37.

⁶ Simon Malpas, *op. cit.*, pp. 108–109.

⁷ *Idem*, p. 109.

⁸ Raymond Williams: (1976/ 1983): *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Fontana Press, p. 51.

⁹ Fredric Jameson (1991/1993): *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, p. 35.

¹⁰ *Idem*, pp. xviii–xix.

¹¹ *Idem*, p. xiv.

controversies, the only term able to comprise the entire gamut of transformations in the contemporary society, because it alone manages, and at the same time, has the obligation of bringing together and of coordinating social practice and mental habits with the new forms of economic production, technological development, communicational system, political organization, and critical, philosophical or cultural theories.

Capitalism with its transformations and new types of change of the epistemological hierarchies was accused of having abolished grand narratives and maybe because “Money spawns money as surely as signs breed signs”¹² as well as because together with the commodification of knowledge and art itself the grandeur of any epistemology was lost. Cultural forms are now produced, exchanged, marketed and consumed as a central activity and expression of an economic society. On the new capitalist market (cultural/ artistic) signification is controlled by the ruling class, and art (at least in the United States) has become “the plaything of (corporate) patrons whose relation to culture is less one of noble obligation than of overt manipulation.”¹³

These are the new values of the world-wide people for, after all that’s how it is now: we live in multicultural times. The world is a melting pot, the self is a transactable item; and if you have a wad of creased roubles that can stick up out of the top of your papers, then whatever your story it will be not so much believed (who believes stories?) but permitted, because nowadays every kind of story can go. (*To the Hermitage*, p. 425)

In a world in which it is not truth but performativity, not reason but power that matter, art has slipped into the sphere of consumption being sacrificed to the needs of the market, meaning that, after passing through the filter of culture industry, it was transferred to the praxis of life and we assist a shift in the structure of cultural commodities which is a result and a reflection of the dissolution of the borders between “high” and “low” culture. The possession of artistic commodities (sometimes exaggeratedly snobbishly regarded as fetishes) is now regarded as a sign of power, prestige, publicity and artists are no longer the owners of their creations (even the ones that may have not been created yet), or do not have the franchise of copyright anymore. Art objects have become commodity-signs that cannot only be deconstructed and interpreted but also dispossessed and physically expropriated in a process of economic manipulation. This is the reason for which postmodernism was sometimes seen as the victim not the accomplice of capitalism. In a world in which “the streets are choking with money if you know how to get it” (*Cuts*, p. 11) man’s actions seem justified on account of the external inflation not internal corruption. This feeling of dispossession is clearly rendered at the level of the individuals’ self in Malcolm Bradbury’s *Stepping Westward* where James Walker gives his verdict of the American adventure that he had:

The truth is I shouldn’t have postured at being a hero. I wanted to work in with the wheels of history. And I should have left history alone, passed by on the other side. That’s the truth. I’m a people man. The myths of history, these new faiths, they’re all myths of dispossession. Take something away from someone and give to someone else. But I’m for people, people keeping what they’ve struggled to have. I don’t think we can yield up what exist for the possibility of what might. That’s my idea of liberalism; kindness to what is, to those who exist. (pp. 319–320)

What Walker deplores in these lines is the loss of individual or national identity because of the frenzy of global exchange, because of the “screwing” of the individual into a gadget, into a mechanism from which he cannot escape anymore. Walker and Bradbury behind him militate for the preservation of the individual’s right of natural manifestation not as a simple part in a capitalist or any other kind of systemic and/ or systematized society. Bradbury underlines that in the context of global political extension (from the centre and comprising the margins) the tendency cannot be but towards such a society in which the capital, economically, politically or culturally speaking, is what matters and in which there is still an increase in this direction:

It is clear that the world after the wall – and not just in the realm of international politics but also in the realm of culture – has become a much more varied and a much more confusing place. In Europe the growth and expansion of the supra-state EC/ EU, and the counterbalancing rise of regionalisms, or new or until recently quiescent nationalities, has had a significant effect on the authority, confidence and cultural coherence of the nation-states that, over the centuries, have been both the foundations and the prime warring factions in the making of the map of modernity. The new economic order has opened the international marketplace to fresh energies, new dispositions of capital, new avenues of trade and human mobility. (“What was Post-modernism?”, p. 772)

This led to the emergence of pluralism and polyglotism, the intersection and interpenetration of variegated cultures, traditions, myths and cultures be they marginal and central thus, what it can be predicted about the new times is that they will bring more contradictions stressing upon the loss of cultural identity. This process also had an impact upon the space – thus, the flows of capital and communication have disrupted the links between place, culture and identity producing a process of deterritorialization (uprooting our former sense

¹² Terry Eagleton, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

¹³ Hal Foster (1985): *Recordings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural, Politics*, Bay Press, Port Townsend, p. 4, *apud* Hans Bertens (1995/ 2005): *The Idea of the Postmodern. A History*, London and New York: Routledge, p.97 .

of place and identity) and reterritorialization (positioning us within different time-space networks). The local is itself more and more global: that is a hybrid space composed of a mosaic of diverse pieces from diverse places.¹⁴

One of the most problematic issues of pluralist postmodernism and capitalism through the problem of commodification has been that of authenticity. The marching of the capital seems to have shattered the value of authenticity, but this problem was solved through an open acceptance of authentic margins instead of inauthentic centres. The ever-accelerating rhythm of the erosion of differences between cultures has been both praised and contested, and thus, people are caught between accepting the new and the different and preserving something of their heritage as citizens or individuals. Malcolm Bradbury too, registers this phenomenon by signalling that the familiar, the domestic, the usual, the sovereign, gave way to the fleeting, the permissive, the illusionary, the transitional, the plural. It was a culture with no form centres and many powerful and assertive peripheries, a compound of multiple myths, needs and interests. (*The Modern British Novel*, p. 512)

Between "beat" and "angry"

Malcolm Bradbury lived his youth in full Beat Generation, times though which he lived on the other side of the Ocean, allowed him to feel perfectly aware of newly emerging freedom manifest in the ones that adhered to "the libertine circle". He also experienced the rages of the Angry Young Men across the opposite side of the Ocean. Though his English propriety prevented him from manifesting in either extreme manner or from openly writing about such practices he was well aware of the impulses and tensions of the generation to which he confesses to belong, a generation "obsessed as they were by the events of the 1956, the double invasions of Suez and Hungary." (*The After Dinner Game*, p. 17) This one of the reasons which makes Bradbury claim that perhaps his was the first real postwar generation.

Malcolm Bradbury, in 1956, after "a liberating year in the United States" and after discovering "Britain in a state of warlike frenzy and political excitement" (*id.*), seemed to bring in his fiction the desire for freedom of the Beat Generation and the rage against a corrupt system of the Angry Young Men. He was aware now that "in the new espresso bars, you could drink a heady draught not just of froth-filled coffee but of angst-laden existentialism and generational rage." (*id.*)

He does create such a pair of bohemian characters in the couple Julie Snow and James Walker from the novel *Stepping Westward* who towards the end of the novel leave conventions, frustrations and obligations aside and take a romping journey across part of America. The two have this (semi-) wild adventure in a double process of self-discovery and reciprocal revealment. What draws them close to the Beatnik movement is their total carelessness of the others, their temporary alienation from the conventional world, their state of sexual and affective inebriation, their acceptance of life as a free-floating entity without fixed or necessary signification:

He was a disciple solitude of and love. He had reached, beyond politics and the working of factions, the ideal city, its population numbering two, its location mobile. (p. 322)

They take delight in their "on the road" state and do not find (they do not even look for) any symbolic attachment. Bradbury even states clearly the demythicized aspect of the journey, a motif and metaphor previously held in high regard:

For this voyage Walker had no mythology; he refused to grant it any order or design. The country he was crossing had stopped making sense, and he was pleased; this was an anti-journey, a journey away from meaning. It was touched with illogicalities. (p. 333)

Consumerism – the new politics for the new "ego consumers" individual

Postmodernism is indissolubly connected to the growth of a consumer culture and increase in the number of participants to a process in which goods, symbolic or otherwise are produced and then circulated in the facilitating context of broadening geographical mobility, new policies of financing and improvement of means of production. The contemporary society was said have been bearing for some time the yoke of consumer capitalism in which the cornucopia of goods of any nature (from material to abstract – that is from merchandise to ideas) is consumed and then processed/ re-cycled and then consumed again. David Harvey registers two developments "in the arena of consumption"¹⁵:

The mobilization of fashion in mass (as opposed to elite) markets provided a means to accelerate the pace of consumption not only in clothing, ornament and decoration but also across a wide swathe of life-styles and recreational activities (leisure and sporting habits, pop music styles, video and children's games, and the like). A second trend was a shift from the consumption of goods and into the consumption of services – not only personal, business, educational, and health services, but also into entertainments, spectacles, happenings, and distractions.

¹⁴ Max Silverman (1999/ 2005): *Facing Postmodernity. Contemporary French Thought on Culture and Society*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, chpt. 3 *City Spaces*, p. 74.

¹⁵ David Harvey (1990/ 2007): *The Condition of Postmodernity. An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Cambridge MA & Oxford UK: Blackwell, p. 285.

What is specific to the age of postmodernism is the fact that these surges of trendy consumption, midway between therapy and ideology, fade away as easy as they came always being replaced by new ones ensuring the continuing ravenous cycle of a society moving rapidly under the sign of progress and discovery. Both fiction and cultural theory register the “commodity’s colonization of the social imagination and its desires”¹⁶ in a world in which people “can’t get *enough* satisfaction.” This is precisely what Malcolm Bradbury and Richard Ruland have observed in their history of American literature:

We are abundant in commodities, clever in the creation of systems; we multiply the technologies of information, the powers of artificial intelligence, the channels of global interaction. (*From Puritanism to Postmodernism*, p. 393)

From this perspective, postmodernism has become a new life style which has invented a new space for such manifestations: the city with its department stores, arcades, or even streets, trams, trains which have developed as epitomes for a practice of consumption in which there is a philosophy and a science of putting things on display, of advertising and marketing them. In the age of “anything goes” the market has changes the dictum into “anything buys”: electric guitars with western plugs; boxes of soap; automatic sewing machines; Black and Decker garden trimmers; huge table lamps with art nouveau shades; electronic keyboards; whole cartons of jars of instant coffee; huge cardboard crates of Wash and Go; AIWA CD players; Barbie dolls in their booby American sex-uniforms; large dinosaurs from Jurassic Park; pocket calculator; beepers; fax machines; electric mowers form imaginary lawns; [...] pink designer sunglasses; [...] brand new trainers from Adidas and Nike; baseball jackets celebrating American teams; big baggy Bermuda shorts; [...] Benetton T-shirts, Gucci loafers, Vuitton-style handbags, Pierre Cardin-resembling shirts. (*To the Hermitage*, p. 88)

We are not only victims of our own insatiable desire of consuming, but also of the cheap imitations that are in the “style of” or “resemble” an original creation, products of an inflationary request of the market. That is why some critics have noticed that postmodernism both comments upon and is complicit with marketplace.¹⁷ We cannot always communicate ideologically but the family of Big Mac, Coke, Levi, Sony, Nike, IBM form a universal language spoken on the meridian taking us from High Streets to squalid neighbourhoods. This aspect could not have escaped from *Why Come to Slaka?* where in a highly comic manner specific to the Slakan-English the author presents the perversions of the capitalist world populating the shop windows on Christmas time (and not only): “toys for youngs as well as olds, parfums for mens as well as womens, unfitting neckties and perverted underwearings, microdot ovals and impersonal computers.” (p. 86)

The new individual in such a space is what he consumes and he belongs to the “newer, post-industrial, middle-classes, with their bases in the media, higher education, finance, advertising, merchandising, and international exchanges”¹⁸ and he is the sum total of his own purchases. These purchases do not include just material goods, but also signs, images, brands and identities (of goods or for himself).

We seem to be living in the third stage of the genealogy of the growth of the market and exchange value as Marx had identified them: in the first (identified more likely with the feudal society) only a small proportion of what was produced was sold or exchanged in the market place; in the second everything that was produced by help of the new industrial forms of production becomes a commodity to be sold or exchanged on the market; in the third stage, which we are currently experiencing, even abstract qualities enter the realm of the exchange-value transaction.¹⁹ It seems (or plainly is) a period of general corruption bringing a reification of abstract notions and devaluing of their aesthetic or philosophical value. It this day and age we can no longer separate the realm of economy and the sphere of production from the realm and sphere of ideology and culture since cultural artefacts, images, representations, and even feelings and psychic structures have become part of a new type of economy and are subject to transactions and negotiations.

The contemporary world was seen as one of consumption at all levels of society – from industrial to cultural. In an age in which we witness “the mercantilization of knowledge”, its transformation in an “informational commodity indispensable to productive power”²⁰ knowledge itself has become merchandise: “Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases the goal is exchange.”²¹ Schools of thought are regarded as multinational corporations, plants in an industry of selling ideas. People of all ages and statuses have converted into consumers, they pay for knowledge, they invest in knowledge, they are “mere empty receptacles of desire”,

¹⁶ Christoph Lindner (2003): *Fictions of Commodity Culture. From the Victorian to the Postmodern*, Ashgate Publishing, p. 1.

¹⁷ Carroll, Noel: “Periodizing the Postmodern”, *CLIO*, vol. 26, 1997.

¹⁸ Scott Lash (1990): *Sociology of Postmodernism*, Routledge, p. 20.

¹⁹ Karl Marx, *The Mirror of Production*, apud Steven Connor (1989/ 2006): *Postmodernist Culture. An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, second edition, Blackwell Publishers, p. 51.

²⁰ Jean-François Lyotard (1984/ 2005): *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, foreword by Fredric Jameson, Manchester University Press, p. 5.

²¹ *Idem*, p. 4.

“creatures of the marketplace”²², a market that has become “a vanguard machine dragging humanity after it, dehumanizing it”²³ because in these time even the self is an item permanently engaged in a transaction of some kind and tempted “into corrupting his integrity with the dross of commerce” (*Cuts*, p. 46) for we do live in a world synonymous with “market forces, consumer capitalism, heavy trading, mergers and takeovers” (*idem*, p. 3). This process is speeded by the promotion of commodity images through radio, television, film, video, the internet. Bradbury’s fiction too registers this phenomenon. Professor Verso registers in a lecture entitled “All You’ll Ever Need to Know” the spreading of knowledge nowadays and the loss of the process of thinking in technologised cluelessness. This is the period when human communicate easily in various parts of the world and process information as well as food at high speed rates.

Our data comes from any source, human or artificial, and easily processes itself into something else or spirals away into some other system. It comes in any form: word, book, symbol, icon, visual sequence. It can jump from code to code, language to language. It needs no thinker, requires no author. Anyone can have knowledge without knowing a thing, except how to switch on a machine that supplies it. You buy brains in a box. You have access to all knowledge and remain in a state of total stupidity. Switch on, log in. That is all you’ll ever need to know. (*To the Hermitage*, p. 194)

The fictional “I” bears much of Bradbury’s own interpretations of the changes suffered by our world and though the tone is excessive in playful pamphlet style the critic’s opinion definitely shows what sides he is taking.

Harsher critics of the phenomenon argued that in the world of fiction this led to a stifling of originality as publishers “were concerned only with reliably saleable goods” and writers complied to their requirements because they “needed either to get published or to sustain their income”.²⁴ Critics have tried to identify the origins of such a transformation and they have traced them in the shift to a new form of capitalism: to the ephemeral, decentralized world of technology, consumerism and the culture industry, in which the service, finance and information industries triumph over traditional manufacture, and classical class politics yield ground to a diffuse range of ‘identity politics’.²⁵

It seems that it was the “the hedonism and pluralities of the marketplace”²⁶ in which “subjects as producers and subjects as consumers [...] mingle incongruously in the same body” the one that set the new basic principles for the new “society of the spectacle”.²⁷

Another aspect triggered by the human experiencing of the society of consumption is a time-space compression. The acceleration in the circulation of commodities, performing of services and execution of financial transactions brought by the advent of the computer compresses both time and space and creates a different reality with its own coordinates. This leads to what Jameson calls the schizophrenic disorientation. David Harvey links this with accelerations in turnover times in production, exchange and consumption that produce, as it were, the loss of a sense of the future except and insofar as the future can be discounted into the present. Volatility and ephemerality similarly make it hard to maintain any firm sense of continuity. Past experience gets compressed into some overwhelming present. [...] Everything, from novel writing and philosophizing to the experience of labouring or making a home, has to face the challenge of accelerating turnover time and the rapid write-off of traditional and historically acquired values. The temporary contact in everything [...] becomes the hallmark of postmodern living.²⁸

Only Zygmunt Bauman sees a positive aspect in the fact that in this society of consumption “the market thrives on variety; so does consumer freedom and with it the security of the system”²⁹ because, according to him, paradoxically, in this diversity the postmodern individual manages to give shape to a coherent system, and find an equilibrium between pragmatism and knowledge.

Conclusions

It is known that usually the time frame in which a writer or critic (a creator in general) lives usually pinpoints him on the map of a literary period and backgrounds him against a certain mentality that permeates his work. But how much of previous periods, trends and theories does he preserve or to what extent does he mark the transition between these? Malcolm Bradbury was surely fascinated with modernism in his critical studies, he described its multiple manifestations and stages of evolution, but his fiction renders the skeptical, parodic and ironic mood of a genuine postmodern who rejects the absolute laws of any self-claiming superior system (and this spans from aspects such as modernism up to communism or capitalism), who rejects the excessive theorization that postmodern decades displayed, but also regards not hopefully the fragmentary society that

²² Terry Eagleton, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

²³ Jean-François Lyotard (1984/ 2005): *op. cit.*, p. 63.

²⁴ Richard Bradford (2007): *The Novel Now. Contemporary British Fiction*, Blackwell Publishing, p. 25.

²⁵ Terry Eagleton, *op. cit.*, p. vii.

²⁶ *Idem.*, p. 19.

²⁷ *Idem.*, p. 14–15.

²⁸ David Harvey: *op. cit.*, p. 291.

²⁹ Zygmunt Bauman (1992/ 2006): *Intimations of Postmodernity*, Routledge, p. 52.

emerged after the demolishing (would be an appropriate term as long the most fervent movements in this direction started in the world of architecture) of the myth of modernism, and the invasion of a culture based on consumption, a type of anything-goes, throw-away type of culture that flaunts the welcoming of collage, pastiche, intertextuality, multiculturalism and pluri-perspectives because of the risk of promoting a pragmatic, kitsch type of thinking.

I have observed that the general feeling is that of loss and bewilderment or even awe at the new developments of a society in which everybody de-constructs (and reconstructs distortedly), de-centres (promoting the local), de-defines (and explains through oppositions or through practical examples), de-historicizes (and hails the end of history), de-naturalizes (creating a false, counterfeited or simulated reality), de-patriarchalizes and de-totalizes (recognizing no absolute authority), de-mythifies (and introduces new false myths), de-creates (and creates using the principles of collage and pastiche) and so on. Malcolm Bradbury built a strong, savory satire against such practices derived exclusively with the prefix “de-” or “dis-” which functions in the same way condemning the postmodern world of having forgotten to build and appreciate the inner world which issued such creations.

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