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ScienceDirect

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 158 (2014) 194 – 198

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

14th International Language, Literature and Stylistics Symposium

The Devil From Supermarket: images of postmodernity in T. Coraghessan Boyle's collection after *the Plague: Stories*

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Abstract

This paper addresses images of the everyday reality in T.C. Boyle's collection After the Plague as symbols of postmodern era. I argue that references and allusions to numerous everyday objects provided in Boyle's stories become symbols of the reality. Although the author doesn't directly depict the settings of his stories, he recounts objects that are distinctly denotative of a certain place (for example, in Friendly Skies Boyle describes the airplane through the images of paperback books, bagels and espresso cups, boarding passes etc.) or action (like the imagery of grocery shopping in the story After the Plague). These objects are often autonomous from each other and deprived of the direct references to their use. Through the plurality of these images Boyle defines the boundaries of his characters' existence and creates a postmodern setting, where illusion of reality is often more real than reality itself. The author not only suggests fragmentation of cultural and social spaces, but also gives an example of postmodern reality as a construct of images.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Dokuz Eylul University, Faculty of Education.

Keywords: T.C.Boyle; consumerism in literature; stereotype; fragmentation; minimalism; postmodern short story

In his interview with Peter Wild for *3AM Magazine*, T.C. Boyle (2003) said: "Literature can be great in all ways, but it's just entertainment like rock'n'roll or a film. It is entertainment. If it doesn't capture you on that level, as entertainment, movement of plot, then it doesn't work. Nothing else will come out of it. The beauty of the

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Peer-review under responsibility of Dokuz Eylul University, Faculty of Education.
doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.12.072

language, the characterisation, the structure, all that's irrelevant if you are not getting the reader on that level – moving a story. If that's friendly to readers, I cop to it" .

As an incredibly productive writer (T.C. Boyle is an author of twenty-three books of fiction – approximately one book per year of his thirty-four year long writing career) he has mastered the art of literary entertainment to perfection: his fiction is witty and enjoyable, moral but not overtly didactic, it deals with issues of current importance but doesn't fall into historicism. Although Boyle tries to maintain an image of an unpredicted writer ("I want to defeat your expectations. I don't want you to pick up any of my stories or books and have any idea what it's going to be," says Boyle in the same interview), there is certain thematic and stylistic unity to his works. Most of Boyle's favoured themes are sure to attract the widest audience: he addresses the issues of masculinity, sexuality, politics, drug abuse, illegal immigration to name just a few. His fiction is rooted in popular culture and often adopts characteristics of other genres. In the above cited interview Boyle continues by saying that literature has taken a third seat to film and music. You could go as far as to say a fourth seat, if you factor in games. Fair enough, a fourth seat.

This interview was taken in 2003, shortly after the publication of his collection *After the Plague* (2001). It is not surprising, that the short stories of this collection are reminiscent of mainstream cinema and computer-games; here Boyle uses dark comedy and satire to draw pictures of post-apocalyptic society (*After the Plague*, *A Friend of the Earth*) and to comment on American social issues (*Killing Babies, Mexico, She Wasn't Soft*). In many stories Boyle uses images from consumer culture to illustrate the postmodern context of the plot. The author recreates the world which is seduced by the image, dominated by Baudrillardrian simulacra and in this sense representative of the crisis of postmodernity.

Thomas Boyle was born in 1948 and as a representative of the baby-boom generation, experienced many of the social and cultural swerves of the second half of the 20th century. In his first novel *Water Music* published in 1982 the author already used many conventions of postmodern literature, including blurring the line between history and fiction: in his foreword Boyle admits that he does not claim historical accuracy or even faithfulness to contemporary accounts whose reliability is doubtful anyway. In the short story collection *Greasy Lake and Other Stories* published three years after the appearance of Boyle's first book, the writer moved away from the seriousness of a literary formula into entertaining his readers: to him a story has failed when it requires a critic to mediate between the reader and author. These 16 stories are set in present-day America and their plots are often organized around an extraordinary event in the life of an average working-class man – the story-line favoured by the pulp-magazines' stories.

Although Boyle decided to disregard the intellectual prerequisite of the postmodern prose, he nevertheless continues to follow the canon in a number of other principles. Here I refer to postmodernism in the light of Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, which addresses the symbol as more real than reality itself: "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting signs of the real for the real" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 4). In this sense, the age of postmodernism may truly be called "the age of symbol and spectacle. […] The new technologies of information and communication permit spectacularizations that have not been possible before, leading to the fabling of the world" (Firat, 1995, p. 250).

Boyle opens his 2003 collection *After the Plague* with a story *Termination Dust*, which starts with a following paragraph:

> "There were a hundred and seven of them, of all ages, shapes and sizes, from twenty-five- and thirty-year-olds in dresses that looked like they were made of Saran Wrap to a couple of big-beamed older types in pantsuits who could have been somebody's mother – and I mean somebody grown, with a goatee beard and a job in MacDonald's. I was there to meet them when they came off the plane from Los Angeles. [...] We came up to the first of the ladies, Susan Abrams, by her nametag, and started handing out corsages, one to a lady, and chimed in chorus, "Welcome to Anchorage, Land of Grizzly and the True-Hearted Man!" (Boyle, 2001, p. 1)

Boyle uses easily recognizable cultural signs (young women in tight transparent dresses, middle-aged women in pantsuits, countermen in fast-food restaurants, an image of a manly man as related to an archetypal symbol of a bear) in order to recreate experience that is defined by the plurality of images. This is what William Carlos Williams called *no ideas but in things*: as the reader is being drawn into the plot of the story, the author provides little characterisation apart from a collage of vivid cultural icons, which invite the reader to recreate the missing

details in the description.

Similar stereotypical characterisation is also present in other stories of the collection, including a story *Friendly Skies* – here the main male character Michael is described as "either a writer or a journalist", who "works on his laptop, the gentle blue glow of the screen softly illuminating his lips and eyes, and drinks Chardonnay" (Boyle, 200, p. 201).

Such accumulation of seemingly random domestic images epitomizes literary minimalism of the late 1970s (which Boyle was very well familiar with as this was the time he started his writing career and soon afterwards received a PhD diploma in Creative Writing and Literature). The paragraph exemplifies minimalism's reliance upon the seemingly unordered presentation of everyday domestic details.

Andrew Hoberek describes minimalism as

> "a school of realist writing characterized by neo-Hemingwayesque aesthetic of terseness and excision, working-class characters and settings, and a preference for the short story over the novel that came to dominate American fiction during the late 1970s and early 1980s. In this period minimalism arose to challenge the prominence of the big, non-realistic postmodern novel associated with writers like Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, and Robert Coover" (Hoberek, 2010, p. 103).

John Barth in this short piece entitled *A Few Words About Minimalism* invokes this school of fiction as "K-Mart realism," "hick chic," "Diet-Pepsi minimalism" and "post-Vietnam, post-literary, post-Postmodernist blue-collar neo-early-Hemingwayism" (qtd. in Hoberek, 2010, p. 104).

However, minimalism needs to be understood less through its frequently domestic content than through its formal commitment to discrete objects divorced from systems that give them meaning. In other words, minimalist text presents images stripped of the organizing principles of linear narrative. For example, in the story *Friendly Skies* Boyle never directly describes the aircraft – the main setting for the story's events, but makes it vividly realistic by numerous images, such as Plexiglas windows, "Fasten Seat Belts" sign, tray tables, a boarding pass, overhead bins etc. Moreover, to make the illusion of reality even more palpable, the author also recounts objects commonly associated with planes: "a neat French braid of a flight attendant", paperback book, pretzels and pieces of fruit, "sloughed shoes", "the handbags skittering by underfoot" to name just a few (Boyle, 2001, pp.194-208). In Boyle's extensive list, these objects, autonomous from each other, are deprived of references to their use, and consequently become icons of their images. The space of a plane then becomes "a construction of language and discourse" (Firat, 1995, p. 244), or rather of popular and common idea of itself.

Here is a thread towards the postmodern context of a minimalist narrative. The text's investment in fragments shows a Lyotardian suspicion to metanarrative, similar to how DeLillo depicts a postmodern decentring of the self in *White Noise*. In this sense we can argue that the postmodern interest in *Petite Histoire* caused the appearance of minimalism as the further step away from the modernist grand-narrative. The minimalist stories about consumerism embrace "merely personal experience" and replace historic postmodern narratives: they "retreat from the kinds of things one finds in history books" into "the smallness, privacy, and racial homogeneity of domestic life" (McGurl, 2009, p. 407).

In his stories Boyle uses various images to depict the every-day life of America, among them the strongest marker being multiple references to food and drinks. Although technically being a sign of a minimalist domestically-oriented style, they at the same time refer to the postmodern idea that reality is a construct of well-recognizable signs. Boyle's frequent mention of food brands and ethnic dishes not only intensifies the idea of the supremacy of images in the hyperreal, but also suggests fragmentation of cultural and social spaces. In the story *Friendly Skies* the characters are offered "stale beer at the airport bar", peanuts on board, "a dry six-dollar bagel and three-fifty cup of espresso at one of the airport kiosks", and "(the eternal question) chicken or pasta for lunch" (Boyle, 2001, p. 201).

In the story everyone seems to be consuming food for its mere availability, without actually wanting or enjoying it: "Everyone had got free drinks and peanuts, but nobody wanted peanuts, and the drinks tasted like nothing, like kerosene" (p.206). In postmodern terms this suggests that the characters are freed from the necessity to find consistent reason in every act, they are "engaged in nonlinearities of thought and practice, in improbable behaviours, contingencies, and discontinuities" (Firat, 1995, p. 255). Each individual pursues multiple consumption experiences, which represent the variety and availability of images in the postmodern era.

This assumption leads us to another peculiarity of a postmodern text: symbolically comprehensible food images not only serve as a background for the action, but also become signs of commodification and prosaicness of consumer culture. To use Barth's terminology, "the reaction to the all but inescapable hyperbole of American advertising" (Barth, 1986) has caused the consumer society to equate commercial images with their real-life projections. This is to say, the postmodern culture of consumerism has transformed linguistic signs into cultural stereotypes. Boyle's portrayal of the two characters flirting over an airline meal is erotic and ironic, if not sarcastic:

> "Their meals had come. The broad-faced attendant was again leaning in confidentially, this time with the eternal question – "Chicken or pasta?" – on her lips. Ellen wasn't hungry – food was the last thing she wanted – but on an impulse she turned to her neighbour. "I'm not really very hungry," she said, her face too close to his, their elbows touching, his left knee rising up out of the floor like a stanchion, "but if I get a meal, would you want it – or some of it? As an extra, I mean?" (Boyle, 2001, p. 202).

Following the tendency to depict social stereotypes through food, the author chooses to characterize his characters by their preferences in drinks. In the same story *Friendly Skies* the nameless "saddlebag face woman with a processed pouf of copper hair" orders "Sprite": she is so unremarkable that the only other reference provided to her by the author is that "the dull thump of her voice is swallowed up in the drone of the engines" (p. 200). Sophisticated and charming journalist Michael asks for a Chardonnay, whereas the protagonist Ellen's multiple glasses of Scotch-and-soda add certain restrained masculinity to her character (after all, she doesn't want to drink her whiskey neat) and to some extend foreshadow her violent break-down at the end of the story.

The identities of Boyle's characters are neither stereotypical sketches, nor the author's play on the reader's expectations, but the readers' interpretation of their discourse. The readers recognize the well-known images and combine them into a kind of "speculative identity" (Zizek, 2008, p. 36). In the second story of the collection, *She Wasn't Soft,* the female character is understood as a ferocious and powerful woman through the meal she is having together with her boyfriend:

> "She wasn't shy about [eating] – not like the other girls he'd dated, the ones on a perpetual diet who made you feel like a two-headed hog every time you sat down to a meal, whether it was a Big Mac or the Mexican Plate at La Fondita. No "salad with dressing on the side" for Paula, no butterless bread or child's portions. She attacked her food like a lumberjack, and you'd better keep your hands and fingers clear. Tonight she started with potato gnocchi in a white sauce puddle with butter, and she ate half-a loaf of crusty Italian bread with it, sopping up the leftover sauce till the plate gleamed. Next it was the fettuccine with Alfredo sauce, and on her third trip to the pasta bar she heaped her plate with mostaccioli marinara and chunks of hot sausage – and more bread, always bread. He ordered a beer, lit a cigarette without thinking, and shovelled some spaghetti carbonara, thick on the fork and sloppy with sauce" (Boyle, 2001, p. 25).

It is not accidental that Boyle describes the meals of the partners in contrast with each other, so that the man's indecisiveness is opposed to the self-control and willpower of the woman. Boyle thus alludes to one of the most damaging effects of postmodern consumer culture that is the process of diluting gender differences which allows women more freedom in a male-dominated society but at the same time feminizes men. Just as a minimalist story replaces historic narratives of postmodernism, emasculated and feminized characters of the consumerism era substitute heroic protagonists of the late modernism. Sally Robinson in the article *Gender and Consumption in the Critical Reception of DeLillo's White Noise* claims that "the crisis of postmodern culture [is represented in the] descriptions of 'the consumer' as the 'quintessentially passive figure' and of consumerism as a replacement of authentic experiences with 'phony' ones" (Robinson, 2013, p. 98). The critic continues her argument saying that "the crisis of postmodern culture that consumerism subtends is a crisis of traditional masculinity" (p. 99).

Boyle's characters strive to regain their masculinity but often do it in an unfair or unlawful manner, which causes their defeat. In the already mentioned story *Friendly Skies* an archetypal plotline of Prince Charming fighting and defeating a dragon is recomposed through the postmodern false mirror. Although at first Michael, the main male character of the story, stands-up to the evil, represented by another passenger's assault against the passengers and crew of the aircraft, he is immediately defeated:

> "in a single motion, [Lercher] snatched the laptop from Michael's hand and brought it whistling down across his skull, and Ellen felt him go limp beside her." Understandably the postmodern parody causes "the fair lady" to take a sword and kill the dragon herself: "At that point she didn't know what she was doing. All she knew

was that she'd enough, enough of […] this big, drunken, testosterone-addled bully and the miserable, crimped life […], and she came up out her seat as if she'd been launched – and in her hand, clamped there like a flaming sword, was a thin steel fork that she must have plucked from the cluttered dinner tray. She went for his face, for his head, his throat, enveloping him with her body, the drug singing in her heart and the Scotch flowing like ichor in her veins" (Boyle, 2001, p. 206).

The narratives which aim to describe crisis of masculinity commonly turn to the description of violence. Slavoj Zizek is among the scholars who relate the society's conformism with violence to the development of consumer culture. The critic argues that aggression is inherent in every aspect of society's existence, but individuals distinguish violence when it is "experienced against the background of the non-violent zero-level" (Zizek, 2009, p. 2). In other words, the society's sensitivity level for understanding violence is distinguished by the culture, whether it accepts or refuses it.

In the story *Friendly Skies* violence is constantly present in the background of the events, so it is perceived as a normal way of the characters' interaction with each other ("The man in front of him lifted a great, swollen dirigible of a head over the seat back and growled, "Give it a rest, asshole. [...] This is bullshit. I'm not going to sit here squeezed in like a rat. I paid full fare, and I'm not going to take this shit anymore, you hear me [...] Fuck, that's all we need. There's no way I'm going to make my connection now. [...] What do you mean, I have to check it, you idiot" (Boyle, 2001, p.194-207) When these situations are regarded within their context, the characters' anger is understandable if not justified, however when considered individually these scenarios reflect the violence existing within the society. Zizek defined this type of violence as objective, arguing that it is always present in the life of any community. Boyle responds to the assertion by describing the constant psychological tension within the society.

The episodes of violence, as well as references to food and drinks in T.C.Boyle's stories aim to reflect the domestic life of America and the culture of consumerism of the beginning of the 21st century. Because of the author's desire to attract and entertain his audience, he creates a text with numerous cultural icons which help the readers relate to the plot. The fragmented minimalist narrative which describes everyday life of Boyle's characters is also reminiscent of postmodern fiction. In this paper I tried to prove, that although Boyle's short stories can hardly be distinguished as purely postmodern, the influence of postmodern canon is visible both on the level of literary aesthetics and cultural ideology. The stories do not 'celebrate' the simplification of an image, but the author's mimicry of cliché and contradicting the traditional stereotypes allow us to relate the collection to postmodern practice.

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