

Postmodernism as a problematics of the suspension
of difference: Robert Coover's
"The Phantom of the Movie Palace"

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Approaches to postmodernist literature have repeatedly, although in different ways, pointed out the significant role which 'fictionality' acquires for its poetics.¹ For Linda Hutcheon, who sees "fiction and history mixed" in postmodernist art, this mixture involves primarily a concern with uncovering the concealed ideologies of historical representations (Hutcheon 3-5). But is this exactly what postmodernist literature does? What do we mean by 'mixed'? And what is its significance for the notion of 'postmodernism'?

As I will argue here, significant among the technical concerns of postmodernist literature is a metaphorical exchange of qualities between two seemingly incompatible domains, the fictional and the worldly. Postmodernist literature establishes a state of undifferentiated proximity for the two domains, a state so troubling and impossible in fact, as to turn the problematics of the suspension of difference that results from it into one of the major possibilities for postmodernism. Foundational of the idea of the 'postmodern' is not the illicit fusion as such, but that in it a sense of the limit that would keep its components safely apart is irrevocably lost, subsumed into the vast and ungraspable 'otherness' into which this fusion emerges. Such is the case, for instance, with Robert Coover's short story "The Phantom of the Movie Palace", which is the first of a series of 'short fictions' that constitute the thematically and technically interactive selection of *A Night at the Movies*.²

The projectionist of the story spends his days in the all-enveloping isolation of the now lifeless movie palace, virtually filling them by randomly re-playing films and trailers, or fragments from the great selection of them he has at his

disposal. His collection appears to embrace the whole history of third-rate constructs of the celluloid industry, while the movie palace which he actually uses as his dwelling-place constitutes in itself the monumental, museum-like record of the theatre's retreat at the advent of the new spectacle, of the dominance of the cinema, and of its development. A prolonged description of the palace is what actually produces, for the projectionist and for the reader, a distance between worlds, the world as it is projected and the world as it is, although the difference between them is only a matter of how literal or metaphorical one decides that the projectionist's 'living in' them is, since a pointed element of artifice is what virtually characterises both. Thus, for the projectionist, as the case often appears to be, the question of 'actuality' starts groping ominously on blurred edges.

At such times, his own projections and the monumental emptiness of the auditorium spooking him, he switches everything off, throws all the houselights on, and wanders the abandoned movie palace, investing its ornate and gilded spaces with signs of life, even if only his own... he sends the heavy ornamented curtains with their tassels and fringes and all the accompanying travelers swooping and sliding, pops on the floods and footlights, flies the screen and drops the scrim, rings the tower chimes up in the proscenium, toots the ancient ushers' bugle... He goes then to the mezzanine and sets the popcorn machine thumping, the cash register ringing, the ornamental fountain gurgling... sometimes fleeing the grander places, he ducks down... to visit... old dressing rooms, clinics, gymnasiums, hairdressing salons, garages and practice rooms, scene shops and prop rooms, all long disused, mirrors cracked and walls crumbling, and littered with torn posters, the nibbled tatters of old theatrical costumes, mildewed movie magazines. A ghost town within a ghost town. (18-19)

Entirely overtaken by the power his surroundings exert on him, the projectionist seems almost exclusively to feed on exemplary movie-going comestibles, thus at one point being found "snapping green and purple sugar wafers between his teeth, the crisp translucent wrapper crackling in his fist" (19). The plainness of his means of living is imprinted in the description of "the homely comforts of his little projection booth": a cot, a coffeepot, and bags of hard-boiled eggs and nuts (19). Nothing else is known about the projectionist, except his pleasures and his anguishes, his fears and his longing, his existential ruminations in his dialogic exchanges with his projections.

Narrative description, limited to plain enumeration when it touches upon the projectionist's few basic means of support, enlivens when focusing on the booth's decorative material, all of cinematic origin. Thus we are told of "the friendly pinned-up stills", of the "favorite gold ticket chopper", of the "wonderful old slides". Nothing seems to intensify more the vivacity of narrative description than the filmic fragments of which it is largely comprised. Five such frag-

ments of various generic origin, ranging from science fiction to romantic comedy are what virtually sets in motion the narrative itself. This is how the narrative begins: “ ‘We are doomed, Professor! The planet is rushing madly toward Earth and no human power can stop it’ ” (13). Only after the fifth ‘horror film’ trailer of the opening sequence does narration turn towards the projectionist, making his own ‘line’ seem as though taking off from the next trailer in the sequence: “Ah, well, those were the days, the projectionist thinks, changing reels in his empty palace” (15). If motion is, as we acutely realize, an integral element of the external world, of life, and if it is the image which here absorbs all movement, setting the world and the narrative itself in motion, then ‘life’ becomes a quality of the image, not of the human subject.

The story divides into two sections which have the form of temporal periods. Although the first section clearly covers an indefinite period of time, we feel as though it offers us an account of the events of one day in the projectionist’s life. “The Next Day” triggers a change in his circumstances and carries the events of the previous day(s) to their logical conclusion. Unlike the typical spectator, who has often been assigned the role of the passive consumer, the projectionist, quite often as it appears, and out of pure joy and curiosity engages in frenzied experimental activity. He produces “split-screen effects”, “montages”, “superimpositions”, “collages”, unlikely, random unions of elements, monumental transgressions of the laws of nature, such as of “crashing vehicles or mating lovers”, “of slow and fast speeds”, “until the effect is like time-lapse photography of passing clouds, waves washing the shore” (22). One night, however, the projectionist touches upon the quintessence of his ‘creative’ expeditions by seizing the possibility of a merging of antithetical genres, “of sliding two or more projected images across each other like brushstrokes, painting each with the other, so to speak, such that a galloping cowboy gets in the way of some slapstick comedians and, as the films separate out, arrives at the shootout with custard on his face” (23). It is precisely this invention which triggers a series of consequences leading the projectionist finally to his death.

Throughout the first section, the ingenue constitutes a constant point of reference, regardless of her innumerable faces and disguises. This is unavoidable, for the ingenue, almost always an anonymous figure of secondary importance and interest, constitutes an indispensable apparatus of the celluloid industry. However, upon “The Next Day”, the ingenue’s secondary functional status is reversed, and the ontological boundaries that keep her ‘world’ safely separate from the projectionist’s are upset. While doing her number in a “Broadway girlie show”, which by that day’s experimental thrusts of the projectionist’s creative frenzy is made to overlap with a “barroom brawl”, she falls upon a gravitational vacuum, “to find herself dropping goggle-eyed through a bottomless tumult of knuckles, chairs and flying bottles, sliding – *whoosh!* – down the wet bar, and disappearing feet-first through a pair of swinging doors at the bottom of the frame” (26). The ingenue’s forced escape renders ineffective the borderline that separates her world from the projectionist’s, although the line is already so thin

that it is impossible to say exactly whose world it is, except in terms of who, or which side, has control over the other. Taking hold of the projectors, she entraps the projectionist in the frame, sending him finally to the guillotine, which, reminiscent as it is of the French Revolution, signifies as blatantly as possible the ingenue's revolt against, and revenge over, her vulgar exploitation by the projectionist.

It is as an object, and specifically as an object of multiple exploitation, rather than of desire, that the image of the ingenue gains significance as an element in the narrative. The ingenue constitutes an archetypal element of the male images of sexuality the celluloid industry abundantly promoted. In her study of *The Sadeian Woman*, Angela Carter grasps, and attempts to analyze, several aspects of this exploitation. She writes: "The real value of a sexually attractive woman in a world which regards good looks as a commodity depends on the degree to which she puts her looks to work for her" (57). I shall leave aside the dirty facts that often accompany the process of promoting oneself in terms of one's 'good looks' in the Hollywood business, often entailing endless and painful transformations in beauty salons, as well as sexual assaults and humiliations. I shall concentrate, rather, on the dangerous and perverse metaphorical aspect of the image, partly cinematic and partly worldly, that the ingenue carries into the frame.

From the whole gamut of qualities that even a minor, secondary role requires, to single out and enlarge one particular characteristic, a pretty face, and turn it into the most essential feature of the picture is not simply to enforce by means of metonymical substitution the same reduction that Georg Lukàcs diagnosed in the fate of the worker.³ It is, moreover, to promote by pictorial means an abstraction into a cultural value, what supposedly must hold true of all women in all ages.

A reductive requirement as physical attractiveness is in itself, it cannot carry and plainly expose within the picture the meanings for which it is initially singled out. The "moral irreconcilability", in Carter's words, of beauty, that becomes manifest in a pretty face and a provocative body, and sexuality "which is the source of that beauty", leads to a further reduction of the latter (Carter 60). The picture, being incapable of carrying its choices to their logical culmination, pretends instead that sexuality is inconsequential and disposable. It is half-disposed in fact. Sexuality has to be there on the surface, and yet under the cover of an inner 'essence' that expresses precisely the opposite of what the woman's physical appearance in the picture provokes. It is precisely this final metaphorical imposition upon the image, of course, which the notion of the 'ingenue' expresses, relating safely the ascending starlet to the role of the naive and innocent 'girlie'. Innocent, as a child-orphan can be in not exactly knowing why she becomes an object of abuse, or naive as an attractive young woman can be in not knowing what eroticism is and therefore turning her ignorance into a joke, this image, says Carter, "makes up to the paedophile in men, in order to reassure both men and herself that her own sexuality will not reveal to them their own inadequacy" (67). It is not surprising that a reversal of the unfortunate circumstances of this image, a deve-

lopment which is given centrality in the second part of Coover's story, lends her more gravity in the knowledge itself of good and evil. To reverse the terms by which one is kept captive to the value of female 'innocence', in other words, to become active is to turn vengefully sinister.

From the point of view of the sinister development of the 'other' in terms of control-taking, "The Phantom of the Movie Palace" re-enacts the gloomy turn which is indicative of the defining mechanism of all major fantasies. What brings *Frankenstein* in particular to our mind is that the process which leads to such disastrous culmination unfolds upon a feverish desire for creation. By breathing life into 'inorganic matter' the projectionist, like Frankenstein, attempts to carry the dream of every artist, who adjusts his dream to the image of the primal Creator, to its fulfillment. Within its space the dream accommodates the inflow of inconsequential driving forces. Frankenstein's unquenchable cognitive curiosity nowhere meets with the pure 'fun', or what seems like basic entertainment, that the projectionist derives from his experiments. However, in spite of their incompatibility, such forces commonly unite quite unproblematically in every artist's dream. Social isolation, often considered a necessary pre-requisite of creation, characterizes both Frankenstein and the projectionist. But the art is vile in its transgressions. In stitching together in one body the bits and pieces of different 'selves', and in giving it life it trespasses on territory in which the human should not, or cannot delve. Hence the 'artist' triumphs in grotesque results and self-catastrophe.

If the question of identity, as Rosemary Jackson argues, holds a dominant role among the preoccupations of fantasy, then the historical development of fantasy constitutes the incessant record of the attempt to annul it. The unremitting desire for a unification of self with the 'other', which Jackson traces in all fantasies, is precisely what indicates the existence in fantasies of the tendency to strike a heavy blow to the notion of the subject as a "coherent, indivisible and continuous whole" (Jackson 82). Drawing upon the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan in particular, Jackson attempts to extract an essence for the fantastic, what holds true of it at all times in spite of its historical development.

Identity is a human construct which imposes limits, "restriction and constraints" (Jackson 78). Fantasy, being the most transgressive of modes, puts identity at its target by giving manifestation to "partial, dual, multiple and dismembered selves" (Jackson 82). In Frankenstein's case, for instance, where the monstrous 'other' is constructed out of the members of 'disintegrated selves', the hero balances unsteadily upon the impossibility of his existence apart from the 'other', and the impossibility of his reconciliation with it. Death is the unavoidable consequence of this impasse. By bringing the human subject to the verge of the dissolution of identity, while rendering indispensable the necessity of its sustainment for the subject's mortal existence, fantasy, according to Jackson, "moves towards an ideal of *undifferentiation*, and this is one of its defining characteristics... This desire for undifferentiation is close to the instinct which Freud identified... as the most fundamental drive in man: a drive towards

a state of inorganicism" (72). This is a state defined by the reduction of all tensions, a state which annuls difference. Transgression, which is a transgression of natural and of cultural laws, constitutes, as it was pointed out earlier, an indispensable tool for making manifest the attempt and the desire for a unification with the other. Since in speaking of cultural laws we mean the laws that guarantee and fortify a society's stability in terms of the morality it imposes, fantasies tend, or rather tended in previous centuries to exert an attack on social mores, if only, however, as Jackson argues, to reinforce finally the dominant social ideologies, hence safeguarding a coherent and stable 'identity' for the human subject (Jackson 122).

What is there left to say about Coover's story if, being in itself fantasy, it merely constitutes an instance, a reproductive mechanism of Jackson's schema? What little there is to add, in fact, could easily render postmodernism a rather shallow, and discouragingly poor story. For the "Phantom of the Movie Palace" seems to mark its place in terms of the historical significance of a literary fiction, by turning fantasy's preoccupation with desire into its own attempt to subvert the seriousness of desire's underlying conflict. But to say so, to invest the fiction with a motive that reveals an undermining streak, does not take us further than the common evaluative remark in the context of postmodernist fiction, that Coover's story constitutes a metafictional parody of Shelley's novel in particular that also bears traces of *The Phantom of the Opera*, and of fantasy as a mode in general. With experimentation no longer giving way in the gradual withdrawal of God to the cognitive challenges that troubled the restless nineteenth-century mind, the question of creation seems now to have been left with no other choice except to rejoice over a loosely purposeful and fatal game (since entertainment seems to be its ulterior motive). But if such a possibility acquires the status of the defining element, if it is characteristic of the state of the novel in our society, if this is what defines it as postmodernist, then this definition of postmodernism does not lie far from Baudrillard's categorical assertion concerning postmodernism: "Playing with the pieces – that is postmodern" (Baudrillard 1984: 24). But is this all that the postmodern is about?

Certainly the question of 'creation' in terms of the 'mechanical' reproduction of the 'self' constitutes parody's main target in Coover's story. Thus, intermittent as the possible reproductions of *Frankenstein* can be, Coover's story exploits its awareness of the fact, by turning it into a constitutive element, into a fragment of the reproduction that it in itself is, even if it stands parodically in relation to Shelley's novel. The story of Frankenstein and of the monster is doubled by Coover's story internally, and takes the form of a filmic fragment, of the projection of a hilarious version of the story's existential anxieties with respect to the question of creation.

But moreover, parody renders the theory almost redundant. It works through a knowledge, an awareness of what fantasy theoretically entails. Thus one may theoretically be allowed to attempt a refinement upon one detail or the other, but the main axes around which the theory of fantasy is arranged are in Coover's

story already exposed in full view. For instance, what we initially perceive as the projectionist's attempt to derive pure entertainment from his projections obeys in fact, in a far more theoretically correct manner, the principle which instructs desire to return to a state of undifferentiation which is the principle of pleasure. Within fantasy, it is transgression which signals the desire for unification, but it is the desire to understand what transgression signifies that activates theory. What renders theory redundant in Coover's short story is precisely the absorption of the theoretical principle that activates our dealing with fantasy theoretically. In the case of "The Phantom of the Movie Palace" it is the narrative itself which establishes, on the theoretical grounds on which Jackson's theory moves, a condition of understanding:

He knows there's something corrupt, maybe even dangerous, about this collapsing of boundaries, but it's also liberating, augmenting his film library exponentially. And it is also necessary. The projectionist understands perfectly well that when the cocky test pilot, stunt-flying a biplane, leans out to wave to his girlfriend and discovers himself unexpectedly a mile underwater in the clutches of a giant squid, the crew from the submarine meanwhile frantically treading air a mile up the other way, the crisis they suffer – *must* suffer – is merely the elemental crisis in his own heart. (23)

And a little later, we are told that: "He recognizes in all these dislocations, of course, his lonely quest for the impossible mating, the crazy embrace of polarities, as though the distance between the terror and the comedy of the void were somehow erotic" (25).

One question that arises with respect to the prevalence, the dominance of the desire for unification, and all that it entails, in its reference to an original human psychic state concerns our knowledge of their relation as a fact and also our pronouncing the desire dominant. For we are constantly assured of the viability of the relation between desire and 'state', but also of the unrepresentability of this psychic state. Jackson writes: "To give representation to an imaginary realm is, however, not possible. This realm is non-thetic, it has no 'human' discourse" (90). But although in itself unrepresentable, we are capable of formulating an idea of what it entails by following the traces it leaves and which are characterized by great intensity in both qualitative and quantitative terms. Castoriadis writes that although this psychic state is unrepresentable, because the "*psyche is its own lost object*",

we are reading its effects when we observe, at all stages of psychical life, the tendency towards unification, the immediate or mediate reign of the pleasure principle, the magical omnipotence of thought, the requirement for meaning. And this is also what the social institution of the individual 'takes into account' when it assures the individual a *singular identity*, posits him as 'someone' recognized by others. (302)

In fact, the desire for unification is so stubbornly persistent in all expressions of human activity that even one of the hallmarks of realistic fiction, its notion of 'character' as an integral, coherent, continuous entity, which Jackson opposes to the treatment of identity by the fantastic mode, and indeed even Jackson's own attempt to discover an underlying unity, an essence for fantasy constitute instances of the same desire. For as Castoriadis says again, "Whether it is the philosopher or the scientist, the final and dominant intention – to find across difference and otherness, manifestations of the *same* ... is based on the same schema of a final, that is to say, of a primary unity" (299).

Although my concern here does not at all reside in the attempt to define fantasy as such, and certainly not to redeem fantasy theoretically from wrongdoings, it is useful, I believe, to have a clear idea of what fantasy entails so as to deal with Coover's story in terms of its being 'fantasy', and also, understand in what terms we can speak of it as postmodernist. Although certain fantasies may be said to privilege, or head for, unification, the point where they seem to converge is primarily a dangerous imbalance through transgression between self and other, where the other makes its presence felt as emphatically other, a dark, evil force, and tends to take in the relationship the upper hand. This is something that Jackson does not fail to notice. From the point of view of the historical development of fantasy, it is not the content of the relation itself which changes, in that it never stops being conceived by fantasy as dangerous or problematic, but the terms which constitute it and the context in which it is placed. But it is precisely such changes that bring about a shift of emphasis that leaves exposed the polarization in which fantasies are typically, according to Jackson, involved and which instruct that a resolution of the conflict between self and other should either give way to the impossibility of unification or, in its more conventional versions, to the restoration of a familiar 'identity'. Such shifts of emphasis can be noticed, for instance, in Kafka's works, and the same can be said of Pynchon's fictions to the extent that they structure themselves on the basis of an employment of the fantastic mode. Coover's story has the appearance of a typical fantasy, but it is its exploitation of what has been thought of as most typical in fantasy that makes its exploitative tendencies more explosive.

"The Phantom of the Movie Palace" could undoubtedly be read in terms of expressing a desire for undifferentiation. One could certainly take the projectionist's own messing with his pictures on the brink of terror and gratification as an indication of his desire to become part of his pictures, to 'lose' himself in them in order to re-enter an original (imaginary) psychic state. One would thus conclude by pointing out how death makes itself manifest as the only means for the human subject to release itself from an impossible endeavour. But such a reading does leave one with an uncomfortable feeling. As I said earlier, the forceful presence of the parodic element itself in the story renders the theory redundant. But moreover, desire, in Jackson's theory of fantasy, has a specific locus of origin, and this locus is none other than the human subject itself. By contrast, as we shall see shortly, in Coover's story the individual subject is

nothing but the effect of a desire whose driving force is to be found paradoxically in the 'other', which is none other than contemporary society itself.

For Coover, as for all other postmodernists, their dependence upon genres that belong to the area of fantasy, a dependence which cannot at all be characterised servile, is inextricable from the question of form. From the formal point of view, the relation of Coover's story to fantasy develops upon the possibility of being provided with the proper means to give expression to what I shall at the moment, and only provisionally, call the impossibility of the 'unreal'. In reading "The Phantom of the Movie Palace" one cannot help being struck by the astounding sense that the narrative, as if closing an imaginary circle, fences reality out altogether and by a simultaneous move entraps social 'reality' within the space of the image. But the 'image' which coincides here with the filmic picture is cultural; it is not private. The image is 'not real' and yet it is to an extent an aspect of a social reality.⁴ It stands on the borderline, with one foot in the realm of psychic privacy, and with the other in social collectivity. Herein lies Coover's genius. Earlier fantasies privatized the imaginary realm and situated the conflict between self and other in the realm of the self. The social context served to define and reinforce this individual reality, in spite of whether the fantasy ended up questioning it, or, more often than not, sustaining the solid boundaries of identity. By contrast, "The Phantom of the Movie Palace" places the human subject entirely within the context of the 'other', and this other, paranoically sinister, is none other than social reality, having terrifyingly turned itself into the unreality of the image.

How powerful a position in the narrative the image holds, we can understand by the symmetry it formally imposes upon the narrative. It is the image which triggers discourse, since with it the narrative starts unfolding, and which fills discourse and therefore prompts it to unfold, and finally, it is with the image holding the leading role in some sort of last existential reflection that the narrative closes: "Company at last! He remarks wryly to himself as the blade drops, surrendering himself finally (it's a last minute rescue of sorts) to that great stream of image-activity that characterizes the mortal condition" (36). By contrast, the projectionist would almost appear as an empty form, pure void, had he not been defined by his functional role as 'projectionist'. But this, whether it is seen as lacking its social character since it no longer constitutes a profession, or simply intensifying more its mechanistic status, freezes the projectionist in the position of the object, of the tiny particle in the process of projection. The projectionist's identity, in the absence of any other human qualities, is then constructed solely by his relation to the image, before it becomes wholly absorbed in it.

Being a filmic projection, the image obviously bears a sociocultural character. It is, moreover, the image of a 'self' that has been subjected to a very specific metaphorical elaboration via metonymical processes. We have already seen how in the case of the ingenue such a metaphorisation takes place in practice, by the selection of one particle of meaning from the whole gamut of meanings

that constitutes a 'self' and how by a metonymical enlargement of this particle into a whole it promotes this shift of meaning, this pseudo-identity into 'self'. The focus of the narrative on the ingenue is certainly not fortuitous. The relevance of the 'ingenue' consists in that it is an image which has undergone a series of reductive metaphorisations, yet such reductions have all taken place in order to increase the image's allure. Hence, like all images, its essence is of a contradictory nature. Precisely because it is of sociocultural origin, the image bears all the qualities of the commodity. It attempts to hide behind its allure all the reductions into which it enforces the 'self', but in not investing its value as commodity upon use, it concentrates all its forces upon the increase of the value of its desirability. This is the fate of the commodity in a world in which economy assigns itself the status of the structuring principle of all social activity. The projectionist's renunciation of his ontological status has its roots in a desire whose activation certainly requires the involvement of the psychic factor, but which no longer sanctions the subject as its locus of origin. In these terms, the principle of undifferentiation activates forces in the individual in order to satisfy a social value.

In the projectionist, identity coincides with double limitation. It is not only restrictive because by definition it must be, but also because, in a move which captures and reflects the operations by which society processes fragmentation, that is to say, its reductive metaphorical transformations, it forces the notion of 'self' almost into the incomprehensible semantic poverty of a tautology (the projectionist is he who projects). By contrast, the image captivates in its space the illusion of a fullness, offers its allure as meaning, and enchantingly invites the human subject towards re-identification. But the dominant quality of the image is that it does not invite negotiation. Precisely because it appeals to a force which is not subjected to logical processes, which moreover obeys only the laws of an original state of unity where "the object was but a segment of the self", the image demands the subject's unconditional surrender (Castoriadis 298). The projectionist's much-desired integration, even his creative impulse, constitute the literal application of this surrender. This is why to experience alienation in the absolute is for the projectionist to "feel his body, as though penetrated by an alien being from outer space, lose its will to resist" (30). However, to seek unification with the other, in the space of the other, by definition equals loss.

Being products of a culture, such images of the 'self' are possibly the most representative – representative precisely because they are images, and perverted, because they are images of the 'self' – aspects of the psychic factor that is operative in the social realm. This operative condition which makes itself manifest in the metaphors that society creates for itself, is called by Castoriadis the 'social imaginary'. In its common or established meaning, the imaginary is that which contains a component of invention, which coincides with the ability to see something as other than it is, or as what it is not. It "is assumed that the imaginary is separate from the real, whether it claims to take the latter's place (a lie)

or makes no such claim (a novel)" (Castoriadis 127). One suspects that the psychic factor, which is so decisively and categorically present in the context of the individual tendency to present oneself with things and relations that do not exist, in dreams as much as in artistic creation, is present here too. However, the social imaginary lacks an original reference-point. It is impossible to evoke the existence of a collective psyche in order to explain the transformative impulse of a whole society in terms of the laws of meaning that govern metaphor (Castoriadis 143).

Yet it is because of the operative signification of the social imaginary that in the modern world we witness such a pervasive exchange of properties between subject and object. In comparison to the metaphorisations to which primitive societies subjected the individual, to treat in our world "a person as a thing or as a purely mechanical system is not less but *more* imaginary than claiming to see him as an owl" (Castoriadis 157). It is also because of the imaginary that needs, as they make themselves manifest in our society, exceed our biological condition. It is because of the imaginary that they can be said to be neither real nor unreal, and because of it that they acquire predominance over the individual. A socially constructed need, Castoriadis says (148), is always invested with a value that surpasses the definition of basic need, whether nutritional, sexual, or other. "More than any other society, the 'arbitrary', 'non-natural' non-functional character of the social definition of needs is apparent in modern society, precisely because of its productive development, of its wealth that allows it to go beyond the satisfaction of 'basic needs'" (Castoriadis 156). The object as commodity form, obeying the principle of exchange value as an independent, powerful logic, eliminates its use value and therefore does not appeal to needs that pre-exist it, but rather creates needs, imposes itself as need along with its appearance in the marketplace. The phantasmatic nature of the commodity consists precisely in that not only does it subsume and mystify the underlying relations of production, but also in that it presents itself as something other than what it is, that is to say, as need.

If I have led my discussion of the social imaginary to this point, it is because what I have called an 'image' not only has the fate of the commodity, since it is instructed by the law of exchange value, but moreover it reinforces the phantasmatic nature of the commodity precisely because it constitutes in itself an image of 'self'. Unlike the object-commodity, images, especially if they are images of self, of an 'other' self, appeal to something else in the individual. The image appeals to desire, activates desire in the subject and this is already a desire for the subject to seek loss. If the commodity acquires in modern society, as it does, autonomy and predominance over the subject, then the image's powerful allure, the hold it has on desire, makes it of all commodities the most dangerous.

If, as Castoriadis argues (157), modern society experiences a domination of the imaginary "as regards the place of individuals at all the levels of the productive and economic structure", and this experience has "all the characteristics of a systematic delirium", then no other form of art can more adequately deal with

its description than fantasy. Fantasy technically permits art to work on the axis of transgression, thus leading metaphor to extreme forms. This is how it effectively diminishes the possibility of gaining threatening proximity to the social imaginary, since the mechanism at work on both planes is the same. Why art should by any means eliminate its closeness to the practices to which society puts the imaginary is an old question which arose together with the advent of modernism.

Modernism's questioning of the realistic descriptive strategies which were employed in an illusory and desirous attempt to depict the world as the world is, was largely a result of an intense awareness of the incomparable poverty with which the human element in early twentieth-century society's metaphors was stricken. The assignment by society of so much significance to the selection of the partial quality, at the expense of the truth that the individual subject is constituted by an ensemble of qualities, the compression of the whole self to a particle only of its meaning, to a function, was what modernist art attempted to free from its impoverishing consequences. The solution it gave to the problem concerned the treatment of the partial feature, of the fragment, in such a way as to release an infinity in terms of its powers of signification, that is to say, it led the signifier towards the opposite direction than did the metaphor at work in society. It is difficult to say what exactly relates Kafka to modernism from the point of view of his unique and pervasive use of fantasy as a formal strategy. However, his works reveal the same intense concentration upon the partiality of the defining signifier determined restrictively by the social function of the human subject. His method consists in investing this particle with monumental strangeness, yet nonetheless placing it within a social context which paradoxically does not at all perceive it or treat it as strange. The signifier, which in the *oeuvre* of modernist writers thrives with significance, is made by Kafka to expand indefinitely in terms of its strangeness.

There has been an attempt, which is more emphatic in Fredric Jameson's essays (see, for example, Jameson 1984), to differentiate postmodernism from modernism on the basis of a relation between art and reality instructed by shifts in the laws that govern economy. If the claim can be objected to as groundless, and it has been, this is mainly a consequence not so much of the incompetence of the critical tools which are employed for the description of what Jameson calls 'late capitalism', as that in *essence*, and since Marx, they have not undergone any substantial change.⁵ But although neither the content of such Marxist critical terms as 'reification' or 'fragmentation' for instance, has changed, nor, obviously, the notion itself has gone out of use in terms of its descriptive potency, it cannot escape our attention that there was an intense concentration during the seventies on one particular aspect of the modern world as a world dominated by a perverse imaginary. Hence, Castoriadis within the context of his theory of the social imaginary elaborates on the possibility of a metaphorical shift; Debord (1970) concentrates on the illusive character of the 'spectacle'; Baudrillard (1988) employs the notions of 'simulacrum' and 'hyperreality' in

order to develop a rather heretical view of modern society as an entropic universe at the zero point of conflict, of communication, and of the 'real'. At about the same time literature seeks for expressive paths that lead it in its formal explorations straight into the heart of fantasy.

In distinguishing between modern and primitive societies on the basis of the metaphorical transformations to which the imaginary is subject, and the consequences to which their imaginary practices lead, Castoriadis says that

no primitive society ever applied the consequences of its assimilations of people with things as radically as modern industry does with its metaphor of the human automaton. Archaic societies always seem to preserve a certain duplicity in their assimilations, but modern society takes them, in its practice, strictly literally in the most naive fashion. (157-58)

Perhaps it is this particular observation which defines the historical moment as well as its importance in terms of the emphasis it places, not so much on the metaphorical character of the semantic transformation to which 'man' is subjected, as on the disappearance from it of this very important element of 'duplicity'. And perhaps, this element of 'duplicity', which signifies the ability to follow the interactive process between the two subjects of the metaphor, the principal and the subsidiary, in Castoriadis's terms 'man' and 'thing', never lost its force as radically as in the sixties, when the threat of losing sight of 'man' altogether loomed so large. For why is it only then that philosophers and novelists alike begin to focus on the radical engulfment of the principal subject of the metaphor, 'man', into the subsidiary subject whose place is no longer occupied exactly by the 'thing', but by already metaphorised images of 'man'? And why does the question of human identity in postmodernist literature become so pervasively and so terrifyingly a question of loss?

Rather than a major shift in the mode of social organization, what may be said to play a constitutive role in the definition of the 'postmodern' is this new intensity in the spectre of losing track of the 'self', of being filled with the desire to be subsumed by the 'other' of society's dominant metaphor. From this point of view, to retreat to the domain of fantasy literature, if only in order to lead it to new and extreme forms, often by merging it with other incompatible genres, as postmodernist literature seems so extensively to have done, becomes the only means of dealing with the position of the individual subject in the world. Moreover, precisely because of its formal strategies which involve leading the terms that constitute its metaphors towards extreme tensions, postmodernist literature avoids being entrapped in the fantasies that the modern world has created for itself and allows itself to be governed by. Once, literary fantasies, confronted with the centrality of the subject in society's formation of its worldview, which, moreover, assigned the subject the status of an essential agent of rationality, called upon dark forces in the individual so as to challenge, or inversely, to reinforce the dominant ideology of their times. But today literature has

no other way of dealing with the world, except by sadly laughing, as the case is with Coover's short story, at the hideousness of its revelations.

If the 'self', which is so troublesome an entity but perhaps because of its troublesomeness also imagined as full of potential, is now on the brink of absorption by a socially constructed image of 'self', then the dream of undifferentiation in which it takes part, in which the 'self' is an actor, is not a dream of which it is also the director. Overwhelmed by the allure of the most spurious of commodities, by the image, which is spurious precisely because, by its complex and intimate associations to the psyche's own phantoms and desires, it is capable of bending the individual's resistance to the greatest degree, the human subject merely acts the plaything, the fool, in society's mad dream of unification, of the absorption of everything into the territory of the Same. In such a context, to fight for difference, to fight for an identity, even if only by bringing society into confrontation with the hideousness of its constructs, even if only by the invention of a name, by proclaiming an artwork postmodernist, seems to be the only effective means of survival.

Notes

1. Philip Stevick (1977), for instance, senses a touch of "irrealism" in postmodernist literature. Brian McHale (1987), who argues that the "dominant" concern of postmodernist fiction is "ontological", places particular emphasis upon the notion of "fictionality". Gerhard Hoffmann (1982) speaks of postmodernist literature as a generic development of the fantastic. Patricia Waugh's employment of the notion of "reflexivity" involves an awareness of the 'fictional' as a quality that is inherent in either of the terms that constitute a world-view (Waugh 1984).
2. Robert Coover, "The Phantom of the Movie Palace", in *A Night at the Movies* (New York: Linden Press/Simon and Schuster, 1987). Subsequent references will be cited in the text.
3. Lukács writes: "the personality can do no more than look on helplessly while its own existence is reduced to an isolated particle and fed into an alien system" (Lukács 1971).
4. There is a sense of 'unreality' with which the image has always, since Aristotle, been related. Castoriadis writes: "Sensuous without matter: this is precisely Aristotle's definition of the *phantasma*, the phantasy, the 'image'" (246).
5. Callinicos objects to Jameson's claim by which the emergence of a postmodern art is grounded on the simultaneous rise of a new 'multinational' phase of capitalism. He writes that such changes are "either the consequences of much longer-term trends or specific to the particular, and highly unstable economic conjuncture of the 1980s" (7).

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Ο μεταμοντερνισμός ως προβληματική της αναστολής της διαφορετικότητας:

"The Phantom of the Movie Palace" του Robert Coover

Αυγή Κοκκινίδου

Κάθε λογοτεχνικό ρεύμα ορίζεται από τις μεταφορές που παράγει. Ο μεταμοντερνισμός επαναδιαπραγματεύεται τους όρους που συνθέτουν τη μεταφορική σχέση ανάμεσα στο «εγώ» και τον «άλλο». Εξαιτίας αυτής της επαναδιαπραγμάτευσης, η μεταμοντέρνα μυθολογία παράγει μια κοσμοαντίληψη που θα μπορούσε να χαρακτηριστεί ως ενδεικτική μόνο της εποχής κατά την οποία εμφανίστηκε, δηλαδή των τελευταίων δεκαετιών του εικοστού αιώνα. Είναι ήδη γνωστό ότι η μεταμοντέρνα μυθολογία υιοθετεί και αναμειγνύει στοιχεία από την αφηγηματική τεχνική διάφορων λογοτεχνικών ειδών και ρευμάτων. Κυρίαρχη θέση ανάμεσα σ' αυτά, για τις στρατηγικές που ανέπτυξε το μεταμοντέρνο μυθιστόρημα, έχει η λογοτεχνία του φανταστικού, η οποία προσδίδει στη σχέση με τον «άλλο» πάντα απειλητικές διαστάσεις. Στοιχεία του «φανταστικού» ως λογοτεχνικού είδους μπορεί κανείς να εντοπίσει εύκολα στο διήγημα του Robert Coover, "The Phantom of the Movie Palace". Το διήγημα, όμως, του Coover αντιστρέφει τους όρους εκφοράς της βασικής επιθυμίας, που σύμφωνα με κάποιες θεωρητικές προσεγγίσεις στη λογοτεχνία του φανταστικού, χαρακτηρίζει τη σχέση ανάμεσα στο «εγώ» και τον «άλλο». Στη μεταμοντέρνα μυθολογία του Coover, ο «άλλος» δεν είναι παρά η εικονική, μετωνυμική ανάπλαση ενός «εγώ», έτσι ώστε να καθιστά ήδη ασαφείς τους όρους της διαφοροποίησής τους, όπως και το σημείο εκφοράς της ίδιας της επιθυμίας. Έτσι, εγείρει μια προβληματική της διαφορετικότητας και εκφράζει την υπαρξιακή αγωνία που προκύπτει από την εμπειρία της «υπό αναστολή» διαφορετικότητας.