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THE ETHICAL VALUES-PROMOTING FUNCTION OF VERY SHORT FICTION IN THE POSTMODERN SOCIETY

The following essay is an attempt to justify the contemporary reader's approach towards reading, and especially the reading of literature, by presenting the factors that have contributed to major changes in the reading habits and techniques of the so-called postmodern society. What is also presented is the form of very short fiction, sometimes referred to as the short-short, as well as its power of conveying not only short-lasting pleasures but memorable images and everlasting values.

Probably the broadest common denominator of postmodern societies that should be identified is the stage of late capitalism in which they finally found themselves at the end of the twentieth century. It is worth mentioning that a number of scholars of postmodernism, especially those inspired by Frederick Jameson's theory of the postmodern era as the cultural logic of late capitalism, emphasize that capitalism in its advanced form does not fundamentally differ from what it previously was; it is merely a much more intensified economic system as it has become globalized. Yet, this intensification, whilst not changing the system, has led to a technological revolution not necessarily corresponding to the scale of capitalism's global expansion as well as its tempo so far.

As with each technological revolution, this one has also been followed by changes in social life and consequently in society's cultural mores. However, now the role of technology in the forming of societies and their cultures is viewed as definitely more powerful, even tantalizing. Most probably out of the technological achievements such as print, wire, photography, telephone, radio, television and computer which one by one accelerated the tempo and nature of culture-forming processes, the computer turned out to be the most influential one, due to the diversity of its applications and its mobility.

In his *Skin of Culture* Derrick de Kerckhove has noticed that the way in which information is processed has actually radically changed with the introduction and popularization of television. Viewers have learned to create a meaningful whole out of news "chopped" into small pieces, and "stuffed",

one by one, within the limited available air time. The fairly wide selection of everyday technical facilities is said to be spoiling contemporary man as he/she does not any longer have to make any physical effort to project his/her will over a distance, and simply gets accustomed to the fact that machines obediently and immediately observe their orders sometimes without even requiring the minimum of attention on the part of their users.

The desire to achieve instantenous goals is also viewed from the perspective of the process called Mcdonaldization. According to George Ritzer, the author of *The McDonaldization of Society* this phenomenon is based on the operational rules of fast food places, and consists in spreading these rules over all possible fields of social life in the United States and other countries that already are at or are just entering the latest stage of capitalism. Quantity and tempo of services as synonymous with quality have become the leading traits of Mcdonaldization. The idea of the "TV dinner", usually prepared in a microwave from frozen ingredients and consumed while watching one's favorite TV show, simplistically but accurately illustrates the tendency to increase efficiency wherever possible. For instance, reading nowadays does not frequently remain self-centred and dominating one hundred percent of the reader's time and attention. Since the availability of books on tapes has become common, it is no longer necessary to concentrate exclusively on the mere activity of reading as it may as well go along with jogging, writing letters, driving or even watching television with no sound.

Having realized the influence which TV has so far exerted over the average citizen's daily routines, some American newspapers decided to radically change their image in order to keep abreast with the fast-flowing times and, speaking in terms of Mcdonaldization, to make the reading process more efficient. The conclusion was drawn that, from the reader's point of view, dealing with articles that begin for example on the front page but end on another one is very inconvenient and thus discouraging, due to the necessity of frequently turning large-format sheets of paper. "USA Today" initiated the practice of placing all texts within readers' eyesight so that they do not have to de-concentrate while looking for the texts' continuations all over the newspaper. To carry out that project, "USA Today" and for example "The New York Times" and "The Washington Post" had to make articles undergo a lot of editing that consisted mainly in considerably shortening texts and sticking to a few bare facts.

The scale of Mcdonaldization is generally wider in those societies which have already entered the most advanced stage of capitalism. That is why, relations between culture and technology as well as the longing for economy and efficiency in all aspects of human activity is very vivid and can be easily traced in the United States. According to Marshall Blonsky, this is due to the fact that "America is nothing other than an incarnation of a tendency of acceleration, movement, dynamism" and "there is less resistance in America

to [...] things happening faster..."¹. Perhaps this happens since, unlike the Europeans, Americans have always been fluid and undefined, which nowadays enables them to function within a new type of society, or "a culture of visual drunkenness"².

TV watching and working or playing on the computer can even be compared to drug taking which "separat[es] ties of the family and remov[es] the difficulty from life. [...] All these constructs, from drugs all the way to the seemingly elegant computer graphics, contribute to the isolation of the person"³ and in this way change the role of the individual in a society and, undoubtedly, the very character and structure of that society. The society of late capitalism is very often perceived as transforming into what cannot any more be referred to as a society, at least in its traditionally known sense. The outcome of that transformation should rather be described as an anti-society since the family, a traditional society's supposedly most fundamental unit, does not seem to rely on cooperation among its members but rather on cooperation between them and technological devices. Such self-dependence of the individual within a family finds a reflection in today's societies' faint understanding of the notion of collective unity, solidarity and responsibility. Besides, the significance of the relation between the machine and the human being, close to symbiosis, is leading to a new social class division in which upper classes are being replaced by an "information elite", and belonging to the lowest possible strata reflects being cut off from sources of information.

Yet, there is another perspective showing that "it isn't that we live in anything that deserves to be called postmodern"⁴ because today's man rather cherishes illusions about being "able to [force] technology to significantly transcend the limits imposed by the physical world"⁵. Instead it looks as if technological development was somehow forcing or luring people to rule the world without actually experiencing its physical, non technological aspects. Pictures on the TV screen and the computer, and the sound from high-fi music equipment surround and embrace us giving the impression of dimension and freedom. Marshall Blonsky acknowledges that impressions, specifically first impressions, are most convincing to the American people of the 1990s. Technology does not allow them to waste time and thus makes it almost impossible for them to endure duration of any kind. According to the author of *American Mythologies*, it would not be too far from the truth to state that "Americans can't stand the idea of profundity"⁶ and whatever is not superficial enough, they just reject. Americans ignore what is believed to

¹ M. Blonsky: *American Mythologies*. New York, Oxford University Press 1992, p. 10.

² Ibidem, p. 234.

³ Ibidem, p. 233.

⁴ K. Sanes: *Advertising and the Invention of Postmodernity*. In: <http://www.yahoo.com/search/potmodern/post5.htm>, p. 2.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ M. Blonsky: op. cit., p. 78.

be still praised by Europeans – "the European obsessions with the face behind the mask"⁷ known as depth. The notions which appeal to the Americans of today much more strongly are "choice, speed, irreversible, aleatory, euphoric, flighty, cool, rootless, visual, sentimental, comfortable, detachable, fun, well being, changeable, and ahistorical"⁸ that symbolize the negation of depth. On the whole, the abundance of ideas and images, "the cornucopia of objects thrown in to the stream by TV – weapons, detergents, fashion, pizzas, presidents, wilding adolescents, joggers, celebrities, serial killers, wine, and faraway places"⁹ makes it almost impossible to get close to the depth while the surface appears so rich and vast.

What accounts for the richness of the notion of surface can be traced back to the time of the birth of electromagnetism at the end of the eighteenth century. Renato Barilli, in his paper devoted to William Blake and the beginnings of postmodernism, concludes that Blake turns away from mirroring nature by means of the measures of height, width, and depth which prove redundant in the "electromagnetic reality"¹⁰ based on electromagnetic waves moving at the speed of light. Hence the turn towards what is the most crucial in this reality - flatness, texture, line, surface and the primacy of energy. Blake's art, created on these premises, does not by any means deserve to be deprived of artistic value, traditionally associated with depth and perspective. Thus it would be too bold to claim that since surface is considered an organizing category, particularly of the American society of the 1990s, societies remain totally indifferent to any kind of ethics. Pro-postmodernism scholars, for example Richard Rorty, protest against the modernists' charge that postmodernism and its enthusiasts "are trivializing a great and serious tradition that should be revered"¹¹. Postmodernists, including Rorty, are not eager to employ any specific set of moral principles as they believe that values should be individually discovered and appreciated through experience rather than in the form of some commandments, rules etc. Yet, the author of an article on Rorty, John Rothfork, at the same time proves that the postmodernist era, despite its open reluctance towards ready-made modernist ethics does not reject the existence of moral values. "The point is that any human being's deepest moral dedications are a matter of personal, performative knowledge rather than a matter of following principles"¹² and Americans as a society "do not want to be holy if that means following an imposed set of principles"¹³, for doing so "is simply

⁷ Ibidem, p. 17.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 354.

¹⁰ R. Barilli: *William Blake At the Origins of Postmodernity*. In: http://www.icgc.com/mcluhan_studies/vol_1_iss_1/article14.cgi, p. 2.

¹¹ J. Rothfork: *Postmodern Ethics: Richard Rorty and Michael Polanyi*. In: <http://www.cramer.nmt.edu/~rothfork/rorty.html>, p. 4.

¹² Ibidem, p. 13.

¹³ Ibidem.

inimical to [their] national character"¹⁴. Perhaps that is why today's American society or what has become of it at the stage of advanced capitalism appears (at least to non-Americans) floating, aleatory and superficial.

Being a society which, in character, is hardly a society at all, has something to do with ethical values, if only through their rejection or different interpretations of the traditional. Blonsky confirms the precariousness of the rich surface which yet "has created a whole new outlook. The new philosophy [that] includes [...] new views of nudity, home, energy, health, history and passion"¹⁵. What can also be added to this postmodernistically messy list is for example truth, originality, objectivity, or any other value crammed in amongst politics, shopping, stretching or dieting. Ethical values, said to be threatened by the postmodern culture of restless immediacy, are actually too old and universal just to disappear. Instead, they function in new contexts, and are "served up" in untypical "packages" and not necessarily by any monolithic moral authority. And since truth, love and beauty are featured by the media and consequently by the market, and they appear in various "outfits" or disguises, it is no wonder that they may be received as a novelty or even a revelation.

A common complaint is that these days "life is deflected and simulation substitutes for experience"¹⁶ and America is an "enormous enterprise for the simulation of happiness, [...] of human rapport"¹⁷, a place where people do not realize that "there ever was real sky, real food, real anything"¹⁸. A number of literary scholars, writers and book-lovers sharing that opinion observe with horror that books are no longer collected and worshipped by readers; they are nothing but a commodity. Not only are books published in simplified versions and can be listened to while the reader is busy doing something else, but are forced to compete with the "warmth of videotapes"¹⁹, which having the same shape as books, perfectly fit the bookshelf and gradually transform it into the videoshelf. Traditionalists and authors of the older generation also point out that their younger colleagues deliberately engage themselves in writing short fiction in order to gain popularity sooner and easier; young writers are blamed for not bothering to put too much effort into the creative process either to worry about the presentation of long-lasting values. Those lamenting over the condition of contemporary arts and literature by calling them shoddy and instant discard short pieces of fiction as "signs of cultural decadence and bonbons for lazy readers"²⁰ who are not able and willing to "stretch" their attention spans in order to go

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 14.

¹⁵ M. Blonsky, op. cit., p. 24.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 242.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 460.

²⁰ *Flash Fiction. Very Short Stories*. Eds. J. Thomas, T. Hazuka. New York, W. W. Norton & Company 1992, p. 23.

through a text longer than a newspaper ad. In the traditionalists' opinion, authors of such texts share the blame for they selfishly and short-sightedly promote short fiction as an antidote to the novel's dead seriousness, and a handy solution for business people aspiring to the reputation of the well-read.

Repetition, imitation, secondariness and citationality considerably mark the condition of the societies which, thanks to their technological advancement, reached the era of late capitalism. However, this does not imply that absolutely every aspect of life is superficialized, parodied and worthless as is feared by those whom the condition of today's culture fills with only protest and aggression. In the so-called aesthetics of repetition special attention should be paid to very short stories popularized as short-shorts, micro fiction, blasters, sudden fiction, or flash fiction. Their authors and publishers constitute an active element in the all-powerful culture-forming system of the media and the market, but at the same time bring the refreshing energy and uncompromising passion of discoverers and explorers. As befits the late capitalist era, short-shorts' publishers do not deny that they have recently started to consider themselves a sort of avant-garde which is powerful enough to appeal directly to readers and impose new trends.

Each of these, often extremely brief, pieces of fiction presents itself as a glimpse of the real stuff of real life, a single incident filled with a load of emotion resulting from different approaches towards such fundamental aspects of life as human dignity, family ties, love, loyalty, death and fear.

The rising popularity of very short stories is explained in the same way as the video boom can be accounted for. The stories' advocates argue that these brief texts are, above all, one of the natural responses to our technologized lives. Today's man's technology-effected reading techniques can be described as not based on eye movements characteristic of a skillful reader, but rather on quick glances at a page in the manner of looking at a TV screen. Besides, the brevity of the stories is indeed adjusted to the reader's attention span, reduced by the previously mentioned conditions prevailing in the age of advanced technologies. Stories are often expected to be written and edited to fit just one page so that there is no "enforced pause in the reader's concentration, no break in the field of vision"²¹. Micro fiction pieces may as well serve as snacks swallowed during a lunch break or while waiting at a bus stop. That, however, does not depreciate short-shorts as they are said to have functioned similarly before the time of television when they "existed as a [...] quick little [stories] with an unexpected twist – something to read while you waited for your turn at the barbershop"²².

And contrary to what short-shorts' opponents declare, flash fiction is able to carry valuable messages over to the societies of the end of the

²¹ Ibidem, p. 12.

²² J. Stern: *Introduction*. W: *Micro Fiction. An Anthology of Really Short Stories*. Ed. J. Stern. New York, W. W. Norton & Company 1996, pp. 17–18.

century as such societies/anti-societies are already used to chopped information and the shortage of time. Furthermore, conveying morally-loaded ideas and teaching through showing examples is not by any means a novelty as some of the editors of short-shorts emphasize in order to support their involvement in the form's promotion. Jerome Stern, the editor of *An Anthology of Really Short Stories* gives the examples of the biblical parable, the joke and the brief animal stories of Aesop as the ancient predecessors of twentieth-century micro fiction. The major difference between those extremely short narratives and the contemporary short fiction is that the latter is usually not, despite its striking brevity, so straightforward and thus requires more involvement and sometimes "a great deal of personal investment to be truly mastered and enjoyed".²³

The ending of, for example, Ursula Hegi's story *November* neither provides the reader with any clear-cut conclusion nor passes any judgment on the daughter of the mother who consciously blackmails her grown up offspring with another onslaught against her own health. It remains the reader's task to draw conclusions about the narrator's (mother's) moral behavior. No ready set of principles is to be taken off the shelf. One has the freedom to adjust the situation to one's own experience and ethics. Another story, perhaps because it is a little longer than the previous one, is more elaborate as to the protagonist's background and motives, and consequently can be more easily interpreted in terms of a warning as, for instance, "Do unto others as you would they would do unto you". In the story *Mr. Mumsford* a black school janitor's bitterness and humiliation resulting from the fact that no one seems to know his real name almost leads to murder, unfolds unhurriedly and yet focuses on probably one of the most triggering moments in characters' lives.

The aforementioned text appeared in the collection entitled *Flash Fiction* and featuring stories with the maximum of 750 words, and therefore not always suitable for printing on one page only. Perhaps due to that, *Mr. Mumsford* can be comprehended in a more traditional way, that is while the turning of pages. The story's plot, not being a complex one, has at least some "space" (two and a half pages) to get developed. The same relates to Francine Prose's story *Pumpkins* that gives the reader a chance to follow for a while the plot evolving in the present tense; the use of the tense stemming from the familiar "static, episodic world [...] obviously [coming] from television"²⁴. The story pictures death, not only as a drama in one character's life, but as an event involving different, seemingly unconnected people and situations, and thus causing various responses: fear, suspicion, loose associations

²³ W. O'Rourke: *Morphological Metaphors for the Short Story: Matters of Production, Reproduction, and Consumption*. In: *The Short Story Theory At a Crossroads*. Eds. J. Clarey, S. Lohafer, Baton Rouge. Louisiana State University Press 1989, p. 203.

²⁴ K. Curnutt: *Wise Economies. Brevity and Storytelling in American Short Stories*. Moscow, Idaho, University of Idaho Press 1997, Louisiana State University Press 1989, p. 213.

and childhood memories. The reader is welcome to add his/her personal reflection upon death as no conclusion or direct commentary is provided. The author can rely only on the audience's eagerness to analyze the characters' moral standards. Another story devoted to death, *Corners* by Sheilla Barry, may make one wonder whether a corpse should undergo any cosmetic corrections to somehow negate the diseased person's suffering and make a funeral ceremony more attractive to the public.

As in the case of *Mr. Mumsford*, *Pumpkins* and in *The One Sitting There*, readers may get the impression of sustained narrative since characters' lives seem to be presented during a more extended period of time comprising events and reflections connected with the past and the present. Actually, what eventually dominates that impression is very much like a single effect. *The One Sitting There* dwelling on the problem of throwing away food focuses on one's attitude towards bread. All blurry childhood recollections concerning the narrator's family's pre-war existence lead to the question of respect for one's daily bread. The final act of throwing a piece of bread away, because it is an easily available product, may symbolize an approach of a representative of a consumer society to access and abundance. On the other hand, the preceding reflections prove that, in such a society, thinking in terms of values is still a valid ability.

In the *Micro Fiction* anthology, texts so compressed prevail that their reading is reminiscent of swallowing a pill in one gulp. It is doubtful whether the process of writing of these stories involves just one stroke of a pen, or rather takes one sitting at the computer. Yet, it was conditioned by the task of filling up "an author's most familiar unit of measure, the single typewritten page".²⁵

To select just a couple of such efficacious "pills of fiction", one of them refers to worry and its varieties (Ron Wallace's *Worry*), another tells about the sense of living without a dying lover (Kim Addonizio's *Survivors*), Jesse Lee Kercheval's *Carpathia* draws the reader's attention to the value of men's and women's lives, many other stories present themselves as recollections, impressions, quick thoughts springing up and disappearing all of a sudden and out of context. Yet, supplying the stories' hardly constructed plots with contexts would automatically deprive the texts of the form of the short-short and turn them into traditional short stories.

Following the line of reasoning proposed by George Ritzer in his *Mcdo-naldization of Society* there is only a slight chance to cease or considerably slow down the development of technology and its effects on the social aspects of life, including the arts and literature. Therefore, as the author's advice goes, one had better make use of what is the most precious, human and valuable in late capitalism's system instead of shedding tears over the state of its culture.

²⁵ J. Stern, op. cit., p. 19.

As for the spread of literary forms that are shorter and shorter, their so often criticized brevity is gradually becoming an attribute, a value in itself in the societies whose mentalities more and more depend on and reflect technological progress. Discussing moral standards in literary forms tiny as small chunks, bites, or pills, has nothing to do with avoiding a dramatic situation when people give up considering values at all, irrespective of the "package" in which they are sold.