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A postmodernist myth in *Girlfriend in a Coma*

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“We live in hope of deliverance
From the darkness that surrounds us...”
(Paul McCartney, *Hope of Deliverance*)

RESUMO

A investigação do romance *Girlfriend in a Coma* permitiu perceber alguns elementos centrais que estruturam a obra como mito e paródia. O mundo ficcional é caracterizado por uma sociedade à beira de um colapso devido a sua incapacidade de mudar seu comportamento e sequer consegue perceber o que está errado. Na narrativa são utilizados recursos estéticos identificados com o realismo maravilhoso, pois, juntamente com a descrição de eventos coerentes com a racionalidade humana, há eventos sobrenaturais realizados pelo divino. Nesta narrativa, a ideologia do trabalho árduo como estruturador da vida em uma sociedade democrática e capitalista é esfacelado em vista dos terríveis efeitos sentidos pelos personagens: trabalho extenuante, drogadição, anorexia e individualismo. Com o uso de teoria da narrativa e pós-modernista, argumenta-se que este romance é um 'mito do novo mundo' ao fazer uso da paródia como forma de contestar meta-narrativas, e ao propor novas cosmogonias baseadas na experiência pós-colonial Canadense.

Palavras-chave: ideologia, individualismo, meta-narrativas, mito.

ABSTRACT

The investigation of the novel *Girlfriend in a Coma* revealed some central elements that structure this work as myth and parody. The fictional world is characterized by a society incapable of changing its behavior or even realizing what is wrong with it. In the narrative some aesthetic resources are used which are related to magic realism because, along with the description of events coherent with human rationality, there are supernatural events performed by the divine. In this narrative, the ideology of hard work as the main structure of life in a democratic capitalist society is unveiled, taking into account some terrible effects felt by the characters, such as: overworking, drug addiction, anorexia and individualism. With the use of narrative theory and postmodernist theory, it is argued that this novel is a 'new world myth' because it makes use of parody as a way to refute master-narratives and to suggest new cosmogonies based on the Canadian post-colonial experience.

Keywords: ideology, individualism, master-narratives, myth.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature has had a major role in society for its distinguished approach to a wide variety of subjects. Throughout history, mankind has acted upon society in many ways – writing fiction has been a powerful one – in an effort to shape it according to ideological purposes. With this, we mean to acknowledge literature's influential role of conveying and forging representations, and its potential for stabilizing or destabilizing a whole set of cultural values. Never neutral, nor unpretending, texts, and more specifically, literary texts – for their aesthetic feature and the set of values attached to them – have, for quite a long time, influenced culture.

I acknowledge the timeless feature of world literature when it comes to life issues. William Shakespeare's, John Milton's and Nathaniel Hawthorne's texts – to mention just a few – still strongly speak to the reader, but there have been some significant changes in recent history that have yielded unprecedented contexts, which can nestle new representations, metaphors, readings, reactions or motivations. Each historical period is unique in its configuration because it is marked by ever happening events. Currently, the plasticity of culture has become more dynamic. One influence is the media. Personally, I think it is important to study contemporary literature because it can help people have a sharper view of their own age, be able to grasp their own time's issues, and have a critical mind against harmful social practices. People need to find a balance between reality and fantasy; since they are both essential, though sometimes one more than the other. Imaginative writing has the potential for taking people up into fantasy and back down to reality. But, as the hero returns empowered from his journey in some stories, so can the reader, with literature's potential to raise awareness.

My interest in the Canadian novel '*Girlfriend in a Coma*', by Douglas Coupland (1998), is tributary to my interest in contemporary literature and culture. The writer's novels have been analyzed by scholars and the media since his first work - *Generation X: tales for an accelerated culture* (1991). Among his prolific fiction and non-fiction production, I highlight *Shampoo Planet* (1993), *Life after God* (1994), *Microserfs* (1995), *Polaroids of the Dead* (1996), *Miss Wyoming* (2000), *jPod* (2006), *Generation A* (2009), and *Player One* (2010). As a vigilant observer of Canadian culture and how it is affected by U.S influence, in his novels there is a pervasive critique to "the growth of American monoculture" (FAYE, 2001, p. 501) and cultural imperialism. The consumerist lifestyle is

exposed as much as “the implications of a society in which advertising claims shape the ways individuals find (or fail to find) their places in such a society” (id, p. 504). The characters lead lives in which an economic purpose is necessary, but they need to “find some meaning beyond economic prosperity” (id, p. 505). His frame of reference has been identified as “entirely circumscribed by popular culture, by film, television, adverts and the buzz of consumerism” (COWLEY, 2003, p. 53). And this includes his understanding that his generation (he was born in 1961) is “the first generation raised without God” (id, *ibid*) meaning that their parents chose to raise their children in an environment without any religious belief. This perception has had an impact in his fiction because his characters are portrayed within these circumstances. Also, as a result of the conflicts inherent to his narratives, the characters usually “mourn not only the lost idealism of their youth but also something more important – purpose, meaning” (id, *ibid*). The kind of characters that appear over and over in Coupland’s books “are lonely people looking for meaning in a lonely world”, according to (BILL, 2000, p. 1150). The effort to escape loneliness is often based on actions that do not lead to long-term relationships: “drug use, casual sex or a preoccupation with work” (id, p. 1151).

It is legitimate to focus on a specific novel in order to see how it relates to its historical context, how it seeks to thrust its message within culture. Since this is a Canadian novel I present a general account of this nation’s literary developments in the past few decades and analyze the structure and themes of this novel.

The story in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, hereafter GC, unfolds in the late XX century. The main characters are senior high-school students eager with life’s perspectives. They have fun together going to wild parties and discovering sex. Karen tells Richard (the romantic pair) she has been having nightmares about the future. In them, life seems terrible because people lack meaning in anything they do without being able to realize it at all. She is the only one who can notice this problem, though without knowing what to do about it. Besides telling all this to Richard, Karen leaves a letter with him which he should not open unless something terrible happens to her. On this very night she falls into a coma that lasts 17 years. The letter reaffirms the intensity of the nightmares, hinting they were more like visions or premonitions. After nine months in coma Karen gives birth to Megan. During the coma the characters go on with their lives entering the workforce and focusing all their energy on working. Alcohol and drugs strike heavily for some, but they are still able to be productive at their jobs. Most of them are lonely as well.

Karen wakes up in 1997; she is then 34 years old and her case is considered a medical miracle by the community. Richard and she resume their relationship right away.

Instead of being marveled by the new technology, as people expected from Karen, she has the impression that her nightmares have come true. Her friends and society in general seem to have narrowed life down to just working. As time goes by, however, she gets acquainted with current culture and her criticism fades away.

Karen shocks everyone when she previews, in an interview to a TV show, the end of the world three days after Christmas. She does not know any details of it, since the voice she listens to in her head now does not make this clear. On the exact day she has predicted the entire world enters in a coma. Everyone suddenly falls asleep, except Richard, Karen, their daughter, and their close friends. It becomes clear to Karen that the voice she hears is that of the ghost of Jared, a friend who had died of leukemia back in their high-school time. The group spends one year in this condition, surviving from what can be still eaten in a world that is in the process of deterioration.

At the end of this period, Jared manifests himself, bringing good and bad news from God. He says that God is disappointed with them because they did not have any serious discussion about the meaning of life even during this dramatic year and so "Plan A" failed. In Plan A, God would make the entire world go back in time to the moment of Karen's awakening and from this point on it would be their mission to spread awareness among people about the importance of living a meaningful life. The method they would use would be the questioning of established practices: they would teach people to question the way things are done in order to improve or completely change them. Plan B's difference is that Karen does not wake up from the coma. She remains comatose in order to become a reminder or a dark conscience of their mission.

The objectives of my investigation are to verify to which extent some characteristics of postmodernist literature are present in GC; how the structure of the novel is organized; how traditional myth is taken and parodied; how the characters are subjected to ideology; and if both postmodernist and postcolonial approaches can be somehow integrated in this novel.

This dissertation is divided in three chapters. In the first I present some notions of Canadian postmodernist literature. The literary context of the 1960s marks a flowering of Canadian fiction supported by a stronger nationalist sentiment and the fertile cultural movements of the minorities demanding equal rights. This effervescent decade is not exclusively Canadian. At the same time, most countries of the western world had their own versions of significant cultural changes influenced by the outcomes of the Second World War, mass media and theoretical developments.

Late Canadian postmodernist literature is deeply engaged in its social and

ideological context, for “gone now is the modernist belief that art can really be autonomous or separate from the world” (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 10). This literature applies itself in the investigation of the relationships between the structures of power both in fiction and in what we call ‘reality’, thus, I develop an analysis of some current social conditions that influence the question of identity conflicts, taking the context of advanced western capitalist democracies, in general, into consideration. Materialist impulse and individualism are two defining features that have both positive and negative consequences on human behavior. However, in order to visualize the ideological forces that work to construct the subject in society, I discuss what ideological formations are and how they work.

In the second chapter I focus on some of GC’s textual characteristics. Besides the descriptions of city life and characters as commoners, there is a pervasive presence of supernatural premonitions, world coma, time retrocession, a manifest ghost, and miraculous healings. For this reason, I raise the question of magic realism, seeking to define this genre and identify its characteristics in the novel.

The coma is a repeated motif that provokes three time dislocations: the first one is Karen’s coma, and the consequent cultural clash; the second one is the one-year world coma while the group of friends stays conscious. The third time dislocation is when the deity makes time go back a whole year to 1997, restituting everything as usual, with the characters being aware of their amazing experience. Such time gaps caught my attention in this novel for their role in granting perspective on cultural practices. The perspective Karen obtains on her own culture, thanks to her 17-year coma, grants her the point of view of an outsider. It is only then that she realize how bad some social practices have become. I analyze their implications based on the concept of ideological formation.

In GC, the biblical myth is recuperated and subverted. A parody of the Christian plan for redemption is constructed anew with a focus in the here and now, instead of the traditional after-life. Parody, as a literary device, gives new meanings to myths which have structured cultural practices by creating patterns of behavior. However, this practice is not a mere substitution of meanings. The postmodern concept of the self-consciousness creates a mocking attitude towards any discourse claiming universal truth or originality, as it is assumed in traditional myths, so parody works to rewrite myths with the self-consciousness of its fictional condition.

Three different narrators take turns telling the story. There are two first-person narrators, Jared and Richard, the former being omniscient and the latter a camera-narrator, plus a third-person omniscient narrator. In close reading I explore their characteristics and the meaning of several points of view in Canadian postmodern

literature.

In the third chapter I identify and discuss the main social problems in the novel's social world, such as overworking, individualism, anorexia and addiction to alcohol and drugs (as side-effects of ideological values related to consumerism and fashion). I analyze the pedagogical plan implied in the story in terms of a possibility of redemption of this dystopian society, in the form of a new world myth based on the questioning principle. In a seeming waste land, the divine seeks to raise people's awareness of central life aspects being dwarfed by the entire cultural context. I highlight the parodies established with some biblical events and the capitalist ethos, and show how the book manipulates traditional myth with postmodernist writing techniques, and how it implies a postcolonial cosmogonical intent.

GC has several formal characteristics in the narration and narrative levels that are approached in close textual reading. My methodology is descriptive and interpretative, with the support of theoretical concepts such as subject, ideology and parody, from theories such as discourse analysis, cultural studies and literary theory.

1. NOTES OF POSTMODERN REPRESENTATION AND CULTURE

1.1. Canadian Postmodernist Literature

In the past half century, a whole set of cultural and scientific changes have occurred in Canada, as well as in the different countries of the Western world. Canadian postmodern fiction has been deeply engaged in the country's social practices, discussing them with a vast array of metaphors and conventions that characterize this period's literary identity.

Hutcheon (1991) takes current western world culture as pluralist and fragmented. The two decades following the Second World War hosted a re-emergence of stylistic innovation in the arts in what was labeled as neo-avant-gard by Bayard (1989). There was, however, a new impulse of pluralism, dislocation and a mixing of the modernist formally opposing styles of the 1920s. The term postmodernist is used for this new attitude in arts, for it serves to show the tendency of fusing fiction with textual process, and moving away from the utopian notion of the artistic progress of modernism.

Canadian fiction had a flowering in the 1960s due to a stronger sense of "nationalist sentiment, government support for publishers and artist, and the general feeling that in cultural terms Canada had finally ceased to be... ..high school land" (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 1). Culture, from this period on, has richly been theorized and I shall make an account of some of its aspects, starting with the meaning of the term 'postmodernism'. This is related to the parenting 'modernism', and some characteristics of the latter are deepened while others are rejected. This is one of its paradoxes. Belonging to modernism, according to Harvey (2005), fragmentation and wordplay are widely used in fiction today.

1.1.1. Ideology

Postmodernist theory in Canada has had a preference for discussing how ideology functions to make the 'cultural' seem 'natural'. What emerges in many novels is the sense that "the 'natural' is in fact the 'constructed'" (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 12). It has also

deconstructed the values taken for granted in society by exposing their materiality. It is necessary here to discuss the concept of ideology and ideology formation and how these construct the subject.

The subject does not realize the material condition of ideology because it is masked or hidden by a veil of neutrality/naturalness. Pêcheux (1988) states that ideology operates the conditions and provides evidence for interpretation, however, it becomes invisible because structured concepts become so internalized that when the subject is called to interpret any symbolic object, meaning seems to be self-obvious or latent, as if his interpretation is self-evident, belonging to an essence, a center of truth. This process occurs in the apparent transparency of language, i.e., the illusion that words have a meaning by themselves: “it is here that the notion of literality lies upon: literal meaning, in the immanent linguistic conception, is the one a word has regardless of its use in any context” (ORLANDI, 1999, p. 51)¹. As the individual is interpellated by ideology as a subject he uses the concepts he is immersed in to interpret reality. In this process s/he feels as if the origin of his/her ideas and ‘forgets’ that ideology as well as language are social and pre-exist him/her. It is possible to explain this concept in a different way by saying that the subject makes use of interdiscourse (the whole set of discourses ever said) in his intradiscourse (his own past and present discourse), but when he refers to any of his previous discourses to support his current one – a system of co-reference – he feels he has come to such ideas by himself, or as being the origin of what he says, “simulating the interdiscourse in the intradiscourse, in a way that the interdiscourse appears as a pure already-said of the intradiscourse...” (PECHEUX, 1988, p. 167)².

Thus, ideology is the “condition for the constitution of the subject and meanings” (ORLANDI, 1999, p. 46)³. The author defines ideology as “meaning practice... ..an effect of the necessary relation of the subject with language and history for the production of meaning” (id, p. 48)⁴. And, she points out that the task of ideology is “to produce evidence, putting man in an imaginary relation to his material conditions of existence” (id., p. 46)⁵. Pecheux (1988) makes a distinction between ‘ideology in general’ and ‘ideological formations’. For the author, “Ideology in general has no history,” (PECHEUX, 1988, p.

¹ ORLANDI, 1999, p. 51 “É aí que se sustenta a noção de literalidade: o sentido literal, na concepção lingüística imanente, é aquele que uma palavra tem independentemente de seu uso em qualquer contexto”

² PECHEUX, 1988, p. 167 “simula o interdiscurso no intradiscorso, de modo que o interdiscurso aparece como o puro já-dito do intra-discorso”

³ ORLANDI, 1999, p. 46 “é a condição para a constituição do sujeito e dos sentidos”

⁴ ORLANDI, 1999, p. 48 “prática significante... ..efeito da relação necessária do sujeito com a língua e coma história para que haja sentido”

⁵ ORLANDI, 1999, p. 46 “produzir evidências, colocando o homem na relação imaginária com suas

151)⁶ it has existed throughout human history as a set of symbolic representations manifest in language that constitutes the means by which human relationships take place. Ideological formations (IFs) are distinct regions within ideology, which are positions marked by historical conditions. Every subject falls within a certain ideological formation for s/he inevitably belongs to a historical context and is, thus, subjected by its material conditions. It is, therefore, the source from which the subject derives meaning. Even words mean according to the IF's internal concepts since they provide specific interpreting tools and points of view towards the empiric world. This process becomes more concrete with the following example: the word 'nation' would bear a different meaning for a British Columbian in comparison to a Quebecoise, given the separatist issues Canada has faced. The former tends to see the indissoluble union of all Canada's provinces as his/her 'nation' while the latter means Quebec when using the same word.

The concept of ideological formation makes clear the material nature of meaning production. It shows that "meaning does not exist by itself but is determined by ideological positions put to play in the socio-historic process in which the words are produced" (ORLANDI, 1999, p. 42)⁷. Between the subject and the empirical reality there is ideology, which is a necessary instance for the process of interpretation. However, interpretation is conditioned by concepts which are, to some extent, different in each ideological formation according to interests of domination. In this sense, subjects are interpellated by ideology differently, according to the ideological formation s/he is in.

The term 'master narrative' refers to "theoretical interpretations of broad scale with a pretense universal application" (HARVEY, 2005, p. 19). The author points out that such texts (myth, capitalism, religions in general) are related to the Enlightenment project in the search of a single interpretation of reality based on the existence of an objective truth: "the world could be controlled and organized rationally if at least man could understand and represent it correctly" (id, p. 35). These stories narrate "practices and beliefs, with the aim of legitimating them. They work as a singular and unified story, whose purpose is to legitimate or found a series of practices, a cultural self-image..." (PETERS, 2000, p. 18)⁸ of a people or even mankind. In a broad sense, master narratives seek to fixate or

condições materiais de existência"

⁶ PECHEUX, 1988, p. 151 "a Ideologia em geral não tem história"

⁷ ORLANDI, 1999, p. 42 "o sentido não existe em si, mas é determinado pelas posições ideológicas colocadas em jogo no processo sócio-histórico em que as palavras são produzidas"

⁸ PETERS, 2000, p. 18 "suas próprias práticas e crenças, com a finalidade de legitimá-las. Elas funcionam como uma história unificada e singular, cujo propósito é legitimar ou fundar uma série de práticas, uma auto-imagem cultural"

establish identity positions for the subject to occupy and in which to behave. These are usually based on binary oppositions, such as man/woman, us/them, normal/abnormal, among others. They mark a hierarchy of meanings privileging one side by subduing the other. Against this homogenizing impulse, Hutcheon (1988) argues that “there are no natural hierarchies, there are only those that we create” (p. 31).

Binary oppositions have been exposed and contested with the concept that whatever idea that may regulate patterns of behavior is an ideological construction, or a linguistic formulation uttered with a dominating intention. Master narratives’ totalizing tendency for interpreting human history is the favorite aim of postmodernist texts’ deconstructing attacks. Therefore, the very bases of the positivist concept of ‘objective truth’ have been questioned in postmodernist literature, and language has been investigated as a means for power relations. In order to deconstruct this asymmetry, writers contest the notions of authority and originality. In a postmodern text this is done especially through parody.

Aesthetic practices since the 1960s have made a great turn by granting increasingly more prestige to the voices of the margins. The position of being on the margin is paradoxical, for it means being in touch but not belonging to something. And this is what happened to the minorities’ voices represented for instance by blacks, feminists, gays and Asians. The post Second World War context of refutation of traditional ideas, especially concerning gender and race, gained massive visibility in Canada with cultural issues and manifestations of “flower power, rock music, sexual desire, communes, ‘hanging loose’ (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 12). Women, for instance, have assumed an active attack on discrimination and the feminist movement became one of the strongest cultural movements of the postmodernist period, according to Hall (2001). Some of the most important feminist tendencies in Europe and in the United States echoed in Canada in the 1960s inspiring other possible identity groups that faced the discrimination of “andro-(phallo-), hetero-, euro- and ethnocentrism” (HUTCHEON, 1987, p. 89)⁹. Black women writers had many motives to contest authority, as human-beings being doubly discriminated. In Quebec the movement for the civil rights was strong in the sixties, according to Hutcheon (1988).

But postmodernist literature is not a movement exclusively led by the excluded. Many European-descendent male writers assume the role of criticizing mainstream culture, a task for the ‘ex-centric’ (the one who undermines cultural universals). The given,

⁹ HUTCHEON, 1987, p. 89 “andro- (falo-), hetero-, euro- e etnocentrismos”

the certain, the unspoken, the original become the target, so even representatives of the WASPs (white anglo-saxon protestant) endeavor to deconstruct their very system. It does not matter if they are inserted in the mainstream culture, postmodernist writers are agents that promote “a challenging of ‘what goes without saying’” (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 3) in their culture.

In spite of the criticism, much of the fiction from all kinds of strata is written with self-consciousness of its undeniable connection to the dominant culture. This condition is not to be denied, otherwise postmodernist fiction would have the same *status* master narratives had in the past. Because of the recognition that any discourse cannot possibly be the objective truth, its materiality is brought up and discussed openly. Postmodernist fiction exposes and explores culture and ideology while acknowledging its affiliation to them.

The vast majority of people do not possess the theoretical knowledge to realize how ideology works to make concepts seem ‘natural’, so postmodernist fiction has had a major role in exploring and revealing the fictional nature of texts, even those which are not considered fiction in textual categorizations. One key device used to show the textual materiality of language is self-reflexivity or linguistic self-consciousness. Postmodernist texts willingly expose their fictional condition, which ultimately counterpoints any authenticity the realist aesthetics claims. Rather, the condition of language as a construct, as linked to an ideological formation, is highlighted with sentences that actually say something similar to ‘But this is fiction, ...’. The self-consciousness of postmodernist texts is the awakening of the illusion of transparent reference to reality. Perhaps it marks a bold endeavor to question how history has been interpreted based on texts taken as conveyors of the objective truth. This opens a cultural agenda for discussions that may reach

“a recognition of the value of difference and multiplicity, a turning from passive trust in system to an acceptance of responsibility for the fact that art and theory are both actively ‘signifying’ practices – in other words, that it is we who both make and make sense of our culture”. (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 23)

Therefore, the alleged involvement of the postmodernist text to the means of production seeks to demystify origins and essences.

1.1.2. The Past

Modernist fiction in Canada largely rejected the past and its validity due to its intent in breaking with traditional models in a search for new ones. There was a ‘forced amnesia’ of half a century during a period called ‘machine civilization’ in the first half of the XX century. The modernist contradictions are

“[a] its classic and elitist necessity of putting order and its revolutionary formal innovations... ...[b] its hypocrite anarchist necessity to destroy existing systems, combined with a reactionary political vision on ideal order... ...[c] its writing compulsion mixed with a perception of the lack of meaning in writing... ...[d] its melancholic sadness for the appearance loss, as well as its experimental energy and its conception strength” (HUTCHEON, 1987, p. 67)¹⁰.

The characteristics of modernist literature above are strongly related to its understanding of objective truth. Postmodernist literature also seeks formal innovations and experimentation, but ‘putting order’ is not a valid enterprise anymore. It is the “local, the limited, the temporary, the provisory that define the postmodernist ‘truth’” (id. p. 68)¹¹, which is shaped within the ideological formation with the understanding of the materiality of meaning within ideology. It is not that meaning does not exist, it does, but it is historically located. Knowledge is taken as in a constant process of revision, as provisory and, therefore, it can not give support to any long-term project for reaching a certain social goal in the future. Postmodernist texts eagerly deal with the present and with the rereading of the past through its texts.

If postmodernist aesthetics rejects the notion of objective truth, this premise leads to the investigation of how history has been written. There is a necessity “to investigate ideology and power relations with all our [their] current discursive structures” (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 59). This process is perpetrated with current culture and with the discursively constructed past. The radical questioning that emerges upon centralized, hierarchic systems does not necessarily destroy them because postmodernist aesthetics “recognizes the human necessity for establishing order” (id, p. 65). There are all kinds of

¹⁰ HUTCHEON, 1987, p. 67 “sua necessidade, clássica e elitista, de ordenação e suas revolucionárias inovações formais... ...sua hipócrita necessidade anarquista de destruir os sistemas existentes combinada com uma visão política reacionária sobre a ordem ideal... ...sua compulsão de escrever, misturada com uma percepção da falta de sentido da escrita... ...sua melancólica tristeza pela perda da aparência, bem como sua energia experimental e sua força de concepção”

¹¹ HUTCHEON, 1987, p. 68 “o local, o limitado, o temporário, o provisório que definem a ‘verdade’ pós-moderna”

orders in the world, and they are, in fact, necessary for living in community, but these systems, e.g., capitalism, socialism, all sorts of religions, laws, etc, are examined as cultural constructions, concepts materialized in texts in order to more effectively or persuasively apply their roles of dominance. Postmodernist aesthetics does not promote nihilism or the abolition of all social institutions. It does reveal that these orders or rules are human constructions in specific historic contexts. They do not dwell outside ideology in an original realm. Therefore, they should not be taken for granted.

The relation with the past is not nostalgic, for the present is not erased so as to idealize a distant past, like in Romantic aesthetics. Postmodernist fiction examines the texts that give access to the past being aware that they were written within ideological constraints and, thus, can not be taken as impartial accounts of facts, in a realist fashion. Hutcheon (1987) says that there is not a denial of the existence of the past in postmodernist writing, but she emphasizes that our access to it is only possible through texts as fictions of the writing of history. No text is free from the subjectivity of its writer since discourse is marked by authorship. Rather, texts “constitute meaning systems through which we give meaning to the past” (id., p. 122)¹² and this is only possible by making semantic, syntactic or lexical choices. Even how the writer punctuates the text may alter meaning completely. In other words

“Meaning and form are not in the happenings, but in the systems that transform these ‘happenings’ of the past in present historical ‘facts’. This is not a ‘dishonest refugee to escape truth’, but an acknowledgment of the function of meaning production in human constructs.” (id., p. 122)¹³

In postmodernism, the rewriting of the past by multiple points of view is a must. Since ideology is inescapable, the plurality of accounts contributes to add perspectives on the past and in its interpretations.

1.1.3. Parody

¹² HUTCHEON, 1987, p. 122 “constituem sistemas de significação pelos quais damos sentido ao passado”

¹³ HUTCHEON, 1987, p. 122 “o sentido e a forma não estão nos acontecimentos, mas nos sistemas que transformam esses ‘acontecimentos’ passados em ‘fatos’ históricos presentes. Isto não é um ‘desonesto refúgio para escapar à verdade’, mas um reconhecimento da função de produção de sentido dos construtos humanos”

The past is usually framed by one of the most used postmodernist devices: parody. Sant'anna (1995) defines parody in contrast to paraphrase. The latter is a similar repetition of a discourse, being obedient to what is already established or instituted. The paradigm is reproduced and maintained. On the other hand, parody seeks to inaugurate something new because it “constructs the evolution of a discourse, a language, syntagmatically” (id., p. 27)¹⁴. A dislocation effect is provoked by the new meaning applied to a recognizable cultural pattern within a given context. Texts exist in relation to other texts in what is called intertextuality. Paraphrase refers to an intertextuality of likenesses, while parody belongs to an intertextuality of differences.

Parody is the postmodern literary device *par excellence*, because it produces dislocation, deformation of the original voice. This rupture is exactly what the subversive intent wishes to institute. In the same text two voices are heard and juxtaposed causing some quarrels by which the reader has got to take position. It disturbs the original text by taking it away from its right place, providing a new context, (Sant'anna, 1995). This movement weakens any original argumentation because the text is not sheltered anymore by its previous context. For a better understanding, parody can be compared to

“a lens: it exaggerates the details in such a way that it can convert one part of the focused element into a dominant element, inverting, therefore, the part by the whole, as is done in cartoon and caricature. And I would say... ..that parody is an act of insubordination against the symbolic... ..It is the inaugural gesture of authorship and individuality” (SANT'ANNA, 1995, p. 32)¹⁵.

In the minimum deviation of a paraphrase there is no subversion of meaning. It corresponds to the “amount of transformations the text can tolerate keeping faithful to the initial paradigm” (id., p. 39). Parody is counter-ideological because it goes in the opposite direction of the original text. It is not a minimum, tolerable deviation; it is rather a total one.

Postmodernist literature seeks to deviate from, or go against the liberal humanist certainties because it simply does not believe them to be universal and eternal. Rather, any concept is localized as occupying a ‘position’ in culture, history, or among other concepts that support it or deny it. This positional condition reveals its ideological origin, means of production or background. With such an awareness of the materiality of any

¹⁴ SANT'ANNA, 1995, p. 27 “constrói a evolução de um discurso, de uma linguagem, sintagmaticamente.”

¹⁵ SANT'ANNA, 1995, p. 32 “uma lente: exagera os detalhes de tal modo que pode converter uma parte do elemento focado num elemento, dominante, invertendo, portanto, a parte pelo todo, como se faz na charge e na caricatura. Eu diria... ..que a paródia é um ato de insubordinação contra o simbólico... ..É o gesto inaugural da autoria e da individualidade”

system of thought, postmodernist culture refuses to validate traditional values and goes much further by deconstructing them. The intertextualization process of parody is used to produce an

“ironic discontinuity that is revealed in the center of continuity, the difference in the center of likeness... ... parody is the perfect postmodern form, for it paradoxically incorporates and defies what it parodizes. It also forces a reconsideration of the idea of origin or originality, an idea that is compatible with other postmodern questionings” (HUTCHEON, 1987, p. 28)¹⁶.

Parodic practice provides a fertile environment because of its hybrid condition. The incorporation of some text from the past sets on an ironic comparison of its precepts within the different ideological formation’s perspective articulated in the new representation. The encounter of a discourse that preaches the validity of its concepts as transcendental with a discourse that believes these same concepts as being cultural constructions has been the motor of postmodernist creativity and production of artistic material.

Along with Hutcheon (1988) it can be said that the use of parody in postmodernist literature is not an irresponsible comic, farcical imitation of past texts. The prime artistic mode of representation is parody for it serves well the desire to repeat a text with some distance for criticism, which also allows questionings. The likeness postmodernist texts have with past texts serves only to highlight the difference. In this way, there is inevitably a proximity with past stories, but the reader can perceive the linguistic game which displaces certainties of a given ideological formation by exposing, with irony, their failures or incapacity of providing accountings for ‘truth’.

The parodic discourse seeks to infiltrate the system it wants to attack. It positions itself inside it, assumes its form or appearance and yet does not lose its destabilizing intent. Parody does not become contaminated with its target concepts because it is sheltered by the perspective it has of its object before entering it, and, also, because the ideas being attacked are not in their comfort zone of origin. The modern system of certainties is, in a postmodern context, read as well by readers who are immersed in the postmodern culture. As a laboratory mouse, the textualized objective truths of the past have to endure the tests – the questioning of their ideology – not in their natural

¹⁶ HUTCHEON, 1987, p. 28 “a irônica descontinuidade que se revela no âmago da continuidade, a diferença no âmago da semelhança... ...a paródia é uma forma pós-moderna perfeita, pois, paradoxalmente, incorpora e desafia aquilo a que parodia. Ela também obriga a uma reconsideração da idéia de origem ou originalidade, idéia compatível com outros questionamentos pós-modernos”

environment, but in the new alien discursive environment. Traditional myths such as accounts of the formation of a nation, or texts that seek to establish the identity of a people are not immune to the attacks of parody as it deals with them with new powerful cultural conceptions consciously developed to deconstruct tradition. Master narratives of the past cannot escape current culture's awareness of ideology, language, power, subject, truth, meaning, center/margin, past, among others, provided mainly by gender studies, postcolonial theories, deconstruction, cultural studies, and discourse analysis. Some of the most characteristic postmodern writing techniques used are "irony, parody, playful self-reflexivity, intertextuality, and the undercutting of the hegemonic patriarchal ideal of the Christian liberal-humanist" (VAULTIER, 1998, p. xi). These literary devices abound in postmodernist Canadian literature with the capacity of destabilizing and demythologizing mainstream culture.

1.1.4. New World Myth

Most myths used in Canadian literature today are "immutable, universal stories that originated in the Greco-Roman period of Western history" (VAULTIER, 1998, p. ix), therefore, they are stories that seek to tell who Westerners are, fixating an identity. Traditionally, they are classical or biblical stories taken as eternal and universal. Myths are constructed in a way to "cover the traces of their fabrication and the historicity of their production: they hypocritically pretend that they are the norm, that they represent eternal verities" (id., p. 13). There is a preference in mainstream Canadian fiction for using biblical myths over classical Greco-Roman myths. The "well-known religious stories implanted in the New World that have gradually taken on a mythic life of their own" (id., p. 42) were brought in during the colonization period of the country. The biblical stories are characterized here as mythical due to their textual function of giving meaning and shape to the world.

One key intention behind myths is to establish one ideology formation in the center of meaning production. In fact, myth making is a didactic form for the introduction and fixation of a desirable pattern of behavior based on a given belief system. The range of themes approached varies greatly ranging from a very specific one concerning a local event with a limited geography, to explanations of the origin of the universe, according to Frye (1973). By creating a fixed hierarchy among the entities involved, its methodology

relies on producing a real, impartial, transparent account of events. Their acclaimed position of center and their source of strength also come from the denial of any other narrative with a different version. The allegation for this denial verses on the accusation of the political interests of subverting reality due to ideological interests. By affirming that, traditional myth states its pretense status as a complete testimonial. Traditional myth does not make questions, it provides answers. Some myths seek to answer where people came from (distant, original past) and where they are going (distant, utopian future).

European fiction began with the writing of myths with the characteristics above around fifteen centuries ago, as Frye (1973) affirms. He describes how literature has portrayed the hero since then, and notes that there has been a downward tendency in the representation of the hero's ethos and his/her position within the environment. Originally, the hero, in traditional myth, is a) a god or god-like human who is superior in condition among other men; b) in medieval times there is the romantic hero who is a human but the common nature law is usually broken and s/he may display his/her immense boldness or weakness; c) there is the high mimetic period in the Renaissance in which the hero is a leader who has more passion or power than the average man but is subjected to the laws of nature and society; d) from Defoe to the end of the XIX century a hero of the low mimetic is portrayed, s/he is a common person, not superior or inferior; e) and finally, Frye describes the fifth kind of hero as belonging to an ironic mode in which s/he is inferior to the average person. This kind of hero has been featured in fiction in the last 100 years. In this generalization, Frye excludes mass literature.

Postmodernist literature rises in this ironic phase of the hero's ethos, and what needs to be investigated is a renewed interest in myth. As already exposed, it is a characteristic of current fiction to face the past in order to discuss the monolithic assumptions that were valid until modernism. Simply rejecting past texts would not be wise because the myths created in fiction are the basis for cultural behavior today. Thus, many postmodernist writers choose to deal with a textualized past. Just like in all other countries of the new world, Canadian postmodernist writers have reflected about their country's postcolonial condition and produced 'new world myths'. These texts take original myth and

...exchange its traditional function as transhistorical master narrative... ...for a function characterized by postmodern indeterminacy, complex postcolonial attitudes, a questioning of history, and a developing self-consciousness that creates provisional and relative identities" (VAULTIER, 1998, p. xi).

The postcolonial condition of Canada marks its identity, and so the new world texts produced in this post-European entity “must throw off – at least to a certain extent – the assumptions contained in traditional stories about the past(s)” (id., p. x). This is equivalent to saying that the past is reclaimed with a different, sometimes opposite view on ‘original’ perspectives of it.

Most of the traditional European-based accounts of the past are based on texts produced within the Christian belief system. These mythological texts narrate stories of the origin and fate of human beings. With the use of parody, postmodernist texts recuperate and give new meaning to most of these stories usually with a postcolonial imprint when a national or more American (referring here to the continent) identity is sought. Most postmodern-deconstructionist characteristics of NWM are also useful in the postcolonial framework because the latter needs to demystify traditional myth to establish a new one. A NWM, however, is more dynamic, undetermined in comparison to the traditional one. They “could be described as in a perpetual state of coming-into-being” (id., p. x). In current Canadian fiction the “narrators of New World Myth flaunt the precariousness of their beginnings while alluding to histories, to narratives, and to the act of writing” (id., p. 6). The writers of such texts do not seek to substitute the master narratives of the past with master narratives of the present. Nevertheless, myths are still created; they may not have the objective of being the norm as traditional myths, but they fulfill the role of shaping the nation exposing their traces of “fabrication and the historicity of their production” (id, p. 13).

Prior to any domestic attack on Canadian myths, postmodern Canadian writers had first to deal with European and American myths. On top of that, just like women, gay, and other groups in general, they had first to discover their history and myths before contesting them. But why does current literature make a return to myth? Is it a means to reinvent reality and present it didactically? The myths parodied are well-known stories – many times biblical ones – which form a basis for the new ones to work on. The dislocation movement parody wishes to make must first evoke what is deep rooted in culture, what is known and believed by many. Then a playful act of redressing takes place, so “contemporary writers are aware of myth as a potential component of those elements used to reimagine the world in a post-European and postmodern manner” (id., p. 21). The nationalist sentiment of Canada after the II World War as a developing nation, feeling on the margin concerning Europe and The United States, favored this domestic imagination of reality. In this context of nationalist myth, developing nations are interested in progress because

“literatures undergo an organic process of growth toward autonomy, and the presence of nationalistic myths in these literatures is taken as a marker of this growth. Implicitly, this development is seen as good” (id., p. 24).

In the Romantic period the national literatures of the old world provided the necessary identities for the strengthening of the countries' unity. NWM also assumes the role of searching for national identities but not within the same frame of reference anymore. For one thing, the open endings of postmodern novels invite the reader to co-create the story and indicate that closure is not desirable or even possible in current culture. Living in a country as young as all other postcolonial American countries, Canadian writers feel the necessity to create myth, for they know that identities need to be discussed and questioned, as much as European-based versions of history need to be rewritten. But Canada does not have a unique cultural face to present to the world. Beyond English Canada and Quebec's 'two founding nations' theory, the whole country is constituted of a pluriethnic mosaic. This condition is met by a sensibility in fiction that recognizes the local idiosyncrasies and the rise, in postmodern culture, of minority, ex-centric voices.

The epistemological change of postmodernism in investigating the past from a plurality of voices, including the minorities', is bound to create tension with traditional univocal texts. In this sense, NWM makes the reader confront the original story with a new version of it, provoking the questioning about the nature of certain cultural practices by offering another version or meaning to it. This questioning takes to an indeterminacy of something that until then was univocal, and shows that the access to the past is through texts that are written with a vested purpose.

1.2. Construction of identity and postmodern ideology

1.2.1. Consumer Society

The concept of 'identity' is important to understand postmodern culture. Since the wake of minority movements, as pointed out earlier, postmodernist literature has depicted characters that face social constraints because of their gender, color, sexual preference or any other categorization that might be applied to differentiate people. Since Canada is a

multicultural country, there have been many writers with different ethnic backgrounds exploring in their fiction these differences in terms of prejudice, social identification, emancipation, and many other issues. To mention just a few, there are Margaret Atwood, Leonard Cohen, Audrey Thomas, Robert Kroetsch, and Tom Wolfe.

The search for identity is permeated by a search for the past because it is a necessary “part of the process of identity construction that is going on in this exact moment, and that at what it seems, it is characterized by conflict, contestation and a possible crisis” (WOODWARD, 2000, p. 12)¹⁷. This is one of the motives why the past, and by extension, myth, is being rewritten. Many writers from those minorities wish to revise how culture was represented in earlier literature.

An essentialist definition of identity will suggest there is an *authentic* set of defining characteristics for a certain group of people. This view is exactly what the postmodernist enterprise seeks to discredit with the use of irony and parody. It would be of no use for the postmodernist writer to attack a mainstream ideology and suggest a marginal one on its place, making it again mainstream. Nevertheless, literary practices have dealt with ideological issues to point out the long established social practices that have maintained a great number of people on the negative side of the binary oppositions.

I am not considering a person’s identity in terms of biological features like sex and color, but in terms of social constructions circumscribed in the circuit of culture: what it means to be a woman, a black person, a Canadian, a capitalist, a socialist, and so on. These subject-ideological positions constitute never-ending ‘processes of identification’, according to Silva (2000) and are represented in literature.

‘Identification’ is a term that signals a construction process which is much more in consonance with the dynamic characteristics of advanced western democracies. It indicates that identity is never completely finished and “once secured, it will not annul the difference” (HALL, 2000, p. 106)¹⁸. To a certain extent, the growing individualism in most cultures nowadays allows the subject more freedom for his/her identification with some of the many cultural values available in society. The emphasis now is on the subject’s self-affirmation, and “the right of individuals to remain different and to choose at will their own models of happiness and adequate way of life” (BAUMAN, 2001, p. 38)¹⁹. This ‘freedom’ in the present society brings some duties as well. Along with a declared greater possibility for

¹⁷ WOODWARD, 2000, p. 12 “parte do processo de construção da identidade que está ocorrendo neste exato momento e que, ao que parece é caracterizado por conflito, contestação e uma possível crise”

¹⁸ HALL, 2000, p. 106 “uma vez assegurada, ela não anulará a diferença”

¹⁹ BAUMAN, 2001, p. 38 “direito de os indivíduos permanecerem diferentes e de escolherem à vontade seus próprios modelos de felicidade e de modo de vida adequado”

choosing, the responsibility for the consequences of those choices cannot be attributed to anybody else but the individual who makes the choice. The more the system or the government grants freedom (a genuine right), the less it feels responsible for the subjects' happiness or future. In the current social configuration there are no great leaders to be blamed in case of personal failures, instead, it is the subject who must assume the risks of 'freedom'.

In a consumer society, the range of choices the subject can make is immense, as long as he can afford them. For the economically privileged the risks for not being satisfied with the new products or services purchased are compensated by the constant new offers and their buying power. The main satisfaction in such a context is not the acquisition itself, but the practice of constant buying. In any event, the propaganda is projected to foment the buying impulse to extremes, to excite people's desires and convince them of their necessity for new products. A common approach to sell more is to make luxury become a necessity, which is cleverly articulated by the advertisement technology. The companies need fashion to change trends frequently and force the disposing of semi-new goods and the buying of brand new ones.

The constant appeal to the subject's attention to new goods and services may be a source of identity insecurity and instability, since s/he is summoned to be the cool teenager, the sophisticated, independent, vigilant, elegant, wise, slim woman (sometimes all at the same time), the young-minded elder, the high-tech man, or the alternative, updated grandmother. But, similarly to what happens to goods, these identity models are in constant change. The lifestyle advertised in the propaganda becomes the desired life because it looks more intense and exciting than real life. For the subject, real life looks like the one idealized on TV while the one actually lived is inadequate or unreal in relation to what is supposed to be normal, according to Bauman (2001). Many of those who can not closely follow fashion trends may feel outdated, alienated, or not actually living as much as the ones who can afford them.

Personal relations are affected by the capitalist system in many ways. Harvey (2005) points out some consequences of the companies' necessity to sell more and how they use strategies to seduce consumers. He argues that social relations are, in large part, impersonal and objective in the postmodern society. People have to deal with strangers to buy what they need, and in doing this, a superficial contact is maintained in which money becomes the nexus.

The technical division of work with a large number of people involved in the production of a single product, and the relation the customer has with a single person to buy it, makes it impossible to realize the others' working and life conditions, or their aims and disappointments. The money exchange for the product is usually the only interaction, which totally hides the subjectivity of the people involved.

1.2.2. Individualism

Postmodernist theory considers any project with or without a *telos* as an ideological construction subjected to failures of all sorts, because of the understanding of the materiality of language and the absence/impossibility of objective truth. Some master narratives are convincing because they are written to mask the traces of their materiality by claiming to represent reality itself. When the subject believes that these culturally constructed structures are established by the divine, nature, democracy, rationality, freedom, etc, s/he has his/her identity constructed according to their precepts of conduct. But nowadays, a different kind of illusion is in course. Differently from past societies, in which the subject had little individual freedom and had to sew up his/her identity with a social order, the subject now is supposed to assume full responsibility upon his/her life by making all sorts of choices. The positive side is the relative freedom of choice there is now in comparison to the determinism of premodern societies. In a world with the opportunity of social mobility, the subject is 'free' to try his/her best, but since it is also an environment where s/he can make choices on his/her own, the responsibility for them is entirely personal. The term 'free' is put in quotation marks because pure freedom or subject autonomy is fallacious for at least two reasons: first, the less money someone has the fewer choices are really available, or "the more choices the rich seem to have, more unbearable a life without choices seems to be for everyone" (BAUMAN, 2001, p. 104)²⁰. Access to good quality education until someone feels apt to compete for a good vacancy is not available for all since most people have to work to support themselves. So, simply choosing a career is not an option in many cases as it is advertised. Second, the subject is not above ideology, or so original that s/he is going to choose autonomously without the

²⁰ BAUMAN, 2001, p. 104 "quanto mais escolhas parecem ter os ricos, tanto mais a vida sem escolha parece insuportável para todos."

influence of fashion trends. In any case, the alleged ‘freedom to choose’ is a widely used slogan, which somehow celebrates the achievements of the minority movements since the 1960s with a greater respect to civil rights and individuality in democratic countries of the Western world. However, if the subject can not succeed in life it is his/her entire responsibility. When looking for someone to blame for any dissatisfaction s/he has to look inside. If people “are unemployed, it was because they did not learn to pass an interview or because they did not make enough effort to find a job” (id., p. 43)²¹. The state becomes free of the responsibility for people’s happiness by granting individual rights and still expects everyone to work hard, engaged in the keeping of democratic values.

If individualism brings more autonomy (as I have previously defined the term) to the subject, it also brings alienation. This has been broadly approached in literature in the last one hundred years. The term ‘alienation’ provides a better idea of the sense of the helplessness extreme individualism brings along. A sense of “impotence is felt even more hideous, frustrating and disturbing because of the empowerment that liberty was expected to bring” (BAUMAN, 2001, p. 44)²² and did not for millions of people.

One of the problems of extreme individualism is that the subject tends to be indifferent to others. Bauman (2001) illustrates the lack of social engagement of the subject with community causes by categorizing the ‘individual’ in opposition to the ‘citizen’. The latter seeks the well-being of his/her community, s/he has a collective sense. On the other hand, the individual is concerned only with his/her well-being, and tends to disregard the other.

Bauman (2001) points out the presence of a general assumption in today’s western society: the disbelief in the possibility of one day constructing a concise project for reaching a fair society where all members may have their needs fulfilled. The enormous task the modern project assumed was the idea of a continuous project of social improvement through humanity’s development of reason/science, in order to take everybody out of scarceness. Signals of the failure of this project are visible since high technology coexists with millions of poor people nowadays. The compensation for such failure seems to be the democratic state most countries have, granting more freedom to the subject than before. The result of the combination of these two processes (modern project’s failure plus democratic regime) is the dislocation of the responsibility of success or not to the subject. The fall of the political left in the last decades demonstrate that the

²¹ BAUMAN, 2001, p. 43 “se ficam desempregados, foi porque não aprenderam a passar por uma entrevista, ou porque não se esforçaram o suficiente para encontrar trabalho”

²² BAUMAN, 2001, p. 44 “essa impotência é sentida como ainda mais odiosa, frustrante e perturbadora em

promises of individualism have proven to be more seductive than a unifying system. Individualism belongs to “an ongoing history that is in course, with its distinct stages – with a moving horizon and an erratic logic of abrupt twists and curves in the place of a *telos* or a predetermined destiny” (BAUMAN, 2001, p. 40)²³ because nothing is culturally definitive in current society. This is not necessarily good or bad, because “few failures are definitive, very few mishaps, irreversible; but no victory is final, though” (id., p. 74)²⁴. This context is very dynamic because there is not a single route, or a defined project to be executed.

It is important not to take the postmodernist discredit of master narratives as the end of cultural practices. A large number of people derive their identities from texts considered sacred. There is a new context of epistemological confrontation in the XX century with the radical challenge postmodernist texts offer to millenary cultural practices, but this questioning practice does not mean the destruction of systems that structure society, according to Hutcheon (1987). Humans need to establish order to be able to live in community, otherwise, it is total chaos.

For those who realize how key-concepts of master narratives, such as gender roles, have been challenged in postmodernism the construction of identity becomes more complex, because, as Hall (2000) explains, those concepts have been partially annulled, or are considered ‘under-erasure’, meaning that they

“are not ‘good to think’ – in their original form, not reconstructed. But once they have not been dialectically overcome and that there are no other concepts, entirely different, that may substitute them, there is nothing to do besides continuing to think with them – although now in their untotalized and deconstructed forms” (p. 104)²⁵.

Although theory in general has had some impact on cultural artifacts, and through these, its formulations have somehow reached many people, there is a huge gap between state-of-the-art theory and the practices of the common individual today. This assertion may show that there are immense differences in the understanding of culture and ideology among people. The practice of unveiling master narrative structures should not be taken

vista do aumento de poder que se esperava que a liberdade trouxesse”

²³ BAUMAN, 2001, p. 40 “uma história em curso e infundável, com seus distintos estágios – ainda que com um horizonte móvel e uma lógica errática de giros e curvas abruptos em lugar de um *telos* ou um destino predeterminado”

²⁴ BAUMAN, 2001, p. 74 “poucas derrotas são definitivas, pouquíssimos contratempos, irreversíveis; mas nenhuma vitória é tampouco final”

²⁵ HALL, 2000, p. 104 “não são mais ‘bons para pensar’ – em sua forma original, não-reconstruída. Mas uma vez que eles não foram dialeticamente superados e que não existem outros conceitos, inteiramente diferentes, que possam substituí-los, não existe nada a fazer senão continuar a se pensar com eles – embora agora em suas formas destotalizadas e desconstruídas”

for granted in society in general. In fact, high studies of theory remain restricted within a relatively small number of people.

2. INTRODUCING MAGIC REALISM – ITS FUNCTION, STRUCTURE AND TIME-LINE OF THE PLOT

In GC there are mimetic environment descriptions of the city of Vancouver, Canada, in the 1990s with actual locations. Hundreds of historical references to culture and facts, for example, the falling of the Berlin wall, also identify the story to current culture. However, in the narrative there are also many supernatural events happening to the characters. The supernatural, as the very word announces, are those events that alter the causality principle, and so “infringe the coherent system of relations established by the cosmic structure as it is understood by human rationality” (D’ONOFRIO, 1995, p. 155)²⁶. This condition is met by the miraculous wonders performed by Jared, a ghost, who comes and goes to heaven flying away, hovering, going through walls and floors, healing people. The summit of the supernatural happenings is reached when the GC-god makes time go back, reawakening billions of people from a death-like coma.

In GC there is the juxtaposition of ‘reality’ and ‘fantasy’ “producing a feeling of strangeness” (VAUTIER, 1998, p. 206). This fusion is called ‘magic realism’, and its capacity for representation has been acknowledged by Vaultier (1998), who affirms that it is a proper style for America in its need to retell history as a postcolonial continent. Canadian fiction, in this case, may create its own cosmogonies, building new cultural practices upon traditional ones that, in view of some, do not suffice any longer.

In the classic definition of ‘verisimilitude’, “art is not true... ..because it is the result of imagination; but it is verisimilar because it is inspired in reality” (D’ONOFRIO, 1995, p. 157)²⁷. The magic realist style deviates from this definition perhaps to re-create history and

²⁶ D’ONOFRIO, 1995, p. 155 “infringir o sistema coerente de relações estabelecido pela estrutura cósmica, como é entendida pela racionalidade humana”

²⁷ D’ONOFRIO, 1995, p. 157 “a arte não é verdadeira... ..porque fruto da imaginação; mas é verossímil porque inspirada na realidade”

challenge totalizing systems. The fantastic element brings a distinctive tone to the narrative, which is charged with meanings and allusions that point back to reality.

In order to characterize more closely the usage of supernatural events as a narrative strategy in GC, here I will use some definitions in D’Onofrio (1995). First, the narrative can be called ‘Apollonian fantastic’ because the vertical plan (supernatural, fantastic place) is inhabited by entities who work for the well-being of humans. Second, the fantastic in this novel is ‘wonderful’ because there is no “rational explanation for the extraordinary phenomena” (id, p. 155)²⁸. One of the narrators, Jared, informs that it is god who performs these actions (world coma, healings, time dislocation, and others).

2.1. Space and plans

Dimensional narrative space in GC can be characterized as ‘horizontal plan’ and ‘vertical plan’. The latter is continuously touched and influenced by the first in GC. Representation is structured in the intersection of these two plans, forming the narrative internal verisimilitude with the logic of cause and effect (realism) when facts are related to the horizontal plan. This logic is broken through the intervention of the supernatural, embodied in a single element, the ghost Jared. He is able to visit the horizontal plan, and is not limited to its laws. The god of the vertical plan has all powers and can even make the whole human world go back in time erasing facts in order to establish a fresh new start. This narrative strategy creates points of intense intersection between the two plans, which adds symbolism to the story.

The first two sentences of the novel already link the two plans: The vertical plan is the first: “I’m Jared, a ghost”, followed by a description of when Jared died as a human “On Friday, October 14, 1978, I was playing football with my high school team, the Sentinel Spartans” (p. 3). Since the very beginning there is an indication of the overlapping of the two plans.

The main location is the city of Vancouver, Canada. The environment is characteristic of a big city with apartment buildings, houses, malls, factories, schools, hospitals, etc. Most families are middle class people working in all kinds of jobs and not

²⁸ D’ONOFRIO, 1995, p. 155 “explicação racional do fenômeno extraordinário”

lacking any necessary material goods for a comfortable life. The government is a capitalist democracy, and working is the main activity for the community. For these reasons, the horizontal plan resembles the empirical city of Vancouver in Canada of the 1980s and 1990s.

In spite of the apparent freedom characters can enjoy, there is a silent, hidden oppression within this environment. Most characters can intimately feel it, but can not understand what it is or what they should do about it. Space can be subdivided in three categories according to D'Onofrio (1995), he explains that 'topic place' is the place known to the characters where they can live in peace; 'atopic place' is where there is conflict and struggle; and 'utopic place' is where there is idealized good or well-being. A major problem for the characters in GC is that the struggle of living meaninglessly is happening in the topic place. Dealing with it becomes difficult because it is not everyone who can feel there is actually something missing: "We get our job done. We pay or taxes. We never forget people's birthdays. So just let us be" (p. 95), "What do you mean, 'meaningless'" (p. 12); the ones who can realize it do not know how to deal with it, "I found myself doing electrical work day in/day out and realized I would have to do this the rest of my life and it spooked me" (p. 72); and what is worse, their ideology formation works to mask the problem as the right behavior,

"A highly competitive society must have simple rules and terrible consequences for not obeying the rules... ..There must be losers on the edge to serve as cautionary tales for those in the center. Nobody likes to see the losers... ..losers are the dark side of society and they frighten people into submission" (p. 81).

The environment contains certain warnings for people to work hard, such as the inevitable disgusting reality of losers who seem to be on the edge because they do not have money for anything. Thus, the lack of meaning in life as a consequence of the downsizing of it to working/career, or how pointless work becomes when there is nothing besides that. The topic place has become much more a place for working than socializing.

Heaven is described by Jared as "the world at its finest... ..It's greater than the material world" (p. 232). It is also the place where people go after death, since Jared was a friend of the main characters, died of leukemia still in adolescence, and is now a ghost in heaven. Heaven is the 'space' in the vertical plan.

It becomes evident that the divine entity is deeply concerned with the pattern of

behavior and the dystopian²⁹ process mankind has entered because it develops a whole intricate plan and acts upon the world powerfully. 'God' is willing to take action to raise awareness of the importance of bonding among people, which he judges has been lost. Karen becomes the channel between the two plans in the beginning of the book, by having weird dreams that seem more than a dream "it was more realistic than any dream. Maybe a kind of vision" (p. 10). During her coma there is no communication between the two plans. After the coma the divine communicates with humanity via Karen only to announce the end of the world broadcast on TV, "The world's going to be over soon" (p. 168). The divine entity, in an extreme gesture of intervention, stops time/history by killing everyone but the main characters. This extremely radical action annihilates life, though not completely. Similarly to the biblical story of Noah's arc, the horizontal plan is reduced to very few people. 'God,' himself, never shows up to the group even in this post-Armageddon environment. Communication is carried out through Jared.

At the end of the one year the world remains in a kind of coma, Jared, who is in charge of calling the attention of the characters to the meaning of life and bringing God's news in the narrative (hereafter 'GC-god'), approximates the two plans by visiting the human characters. Such inter-plan visitation in literature is usually marked by wonderful events. The pattern is not different in this narrative, for Jared performs supernatural signals: a) Linus (Richard's close friend) is given the opportunity to see heaven. Jared says "I approach him and place my hands on top of his head, making his body jiggle like a motel bed. I say 'There.' Linus goes rigid, grows limp, and then swoons to the pavement; I've shown him a glimpse of heaven" (p. 239). In this brief moment a member of the horizontal plan can actually see the vertical one. The vision is so intense that Linus stays blind for a week; b) he also heals Megan's blind baby, but it is not a simple cure, the moment inspires further implications in the post-coma world because besides being cured the child receives the divine gift of wisdom. Jared says "I breathe gently into each of Jane's [Karen's granddaughter] eyes and then I touch my tongue to the space between her eyes, I am the first thing she sees on Earth. 'Your kid is whole. She's more than whole – she's a genius; she'll be wise. And you are now her servant" (p. 232); c) Jared and Wendy have sex and Wendy gets pregnant.

In the story, the effect of strangeness is provoked by the touching of the two plans. The three examples above suggest further developments for the human society of the

²⁹ 'Dystopia' is "a term coined to convey the opposite of utopia: the dystopian mode, which projects an unpleasant or catastrophic future" (DRABBLE, M., & STRINGER, J., 2003, p. 196).

narrative. These miraculous performances are bound to herald great changes in the horizontal plan. None of them can be verified, for the book ends at the moment the 'restart button' is pressed, but they allow the reader the possibility of imagining what repercussions a i) person who has actually seen heaven, a ii) person with supernatural-obtained intelligence, and a iii) person who is half-human, half-divine may have on society. These miracles are all performed by Jared.

2.2. Time and its dislocations

Time is short for the adult characters who are usually very busy with their work, devoting most of their attention to it. The working routine defines the accelerated rhythm of this time with deadlines and appointments. It also makes time scarce because it consumes most of it, as Karen notices that "Nobody *has* time anymore" (p. 156), after she wakes up from the coma. People feel the pressure of time compelling them to act fast upon their careers.

In this narrative, time is treated in many ways. There is the normal flow of days passing and people aging, which is *A) chronological time category*, or what I call here to illustrate 'Play Mode' (in comparison to the features of a DVD player); but besides this more commonly used time status, there are five more different treatments given to it, identified here: the ghost Jared is *B) out of time*, or in 'Menu Mode', because since he is dead, he does not belong to the horizontal plan where there is aging and time is counted in hours, days, etc., the time dimension does not affect him in any way; Karen's supernatural-motivated dreams show her what is to come in the future and she is able to actually see her friends and herself in adulthood. This feature produces *C) ahead of time*, or 'Fast-Forward Mode'; Karen's coma holds time still, at least in her perspective, because she does not have any detected high brain activity. Her body continues aging, but her mind falls within *D) time on 'stand-by'*, or 'Pause Mode'; the one-year purgatory the characters go through is a moment when the six billion people on earth die. During this time, humanity is in *E) no time*, or 'Off Mode', because there is no brain or body activity for them; finally, there is *F) time moved backward*, or 'Rewind Mode'. This happens when the whole world goes back in time for about two years to the moment when Karen would wake up from her

coma in 1997. In regards to the nature of these time movements, letters B, C, E, and F are supernaturally motivated, either because the event totally breaks cause and effect of physical laws - Jared's existence, return in time, for instance -, or because the explanation to them is not natural although it could be – the death of humanity, for instance; and, letters A and D are rationally understandable.

Following is a time-line of the plot:

1. Jared says the world as the reader knows it is over;
2. 19 years before, Richard and Karen (both 17) have sex for the first time;
3. Karen reveals her prophetic dreams of their meaningless lives in the future;
4. The next day Karen falls into a coma;
5. Karen gives birth to Megan while in coma;
6. Characters grow into adulthood to become what Karen had dreamed of, while she stays in coma;
7. Karen wakes up from her coma after 17 years;
8. Karen realizes her friends have become what she saw in her dreams;
9. The 'voice' in her head says the world is going to end by Christmas and she makes this prediction while giving a TV interview;
10. Every person in the world, except the main characters, dies suddenly;
11. The main characters spend almost a year surviving in a deteriorating world without any serious discussion about the meaning of life;
12. Jared appears to them, heals some, impregnates Wendy, and explains Plan B;
13. They all accept their mission of questioning everything in order to improve life on earth upon its promised restart;
14. Time is moved backward to 1997. Nobody but the main characters have conscience of what happened.

When Karen enters the coma, she is removed from the dictatorship of short time. Her condition of being half-alive works to isolate her from the cultural developments that occur with the passing of time. Seventeen years is considered an extremely long time period in a fast-paced society, and indeed, an immense number of important events occur during this time, from 1979 to 1997, promoting many technological developments, new historical facts, changes in all areas of art, design, politics, etc. In general the whole culture goes through some changes in one way or another. No ideology formation is static

because it is not insulated from other concepts that are in constant movement with human action through history. The cultural interactions inevitably occur in language may progressively destabilize and alter, to some extent, the configuration that characterizes the ideological formation in a certain period of time. It is because of this basic principle that culture changes through time. When Karen wakes up, she has a perspective no other character in the horizontal plan has. This makes her different from them, because when speaking

“the subject means in determined conditions, impelled, on the one hand, by language, and on the other, by the world, by his/her experience, by facts that claim meanings, and also by his/her discursive memory, by a knowledge/power/duty to say, in which the facts make sense for belonging to discursive formations that represent in discourse ideological injunctions” (ORLANDI, 1999, p. 53)³⁰.

The time she remained unconscious is a time not lived in history, not lived in society. Even society expected Karen to react to the differences that had occurred in culture and technology when it knew of the ‘miraculous’ waking. This becomes evident when Gloria, the talk-show host who interviews her, asks the viewers “And what sort of world did Karen wake up to? A dramatically different world – one without the Berlin Wall and one with AIDS, computers...” (p. 164).

One of the most interesting conflicts that happens in the narrative is the clash of the 1979 ideology formation with its time-modified-itself, or development, the 1997 ideology formation. Karen’s coma is able to preserve her mind set in 1979. Differently from a newborn baby, Karen wakes up from the coma already as a subject who has lived (spent time) in determined conditions, and is, therefore, marked symbolically by the cultural values she was immersed in before the coma. Now, it is not that she wakes up in a *totally* different world, but that the concepts within her ideological formation are not exactly the same since many happenings influenced the culture in 17 years, altering it significantly. Certainly she can recognize many similarities between the world of 1979 and the world of 1997 at the time of her waking. But it is the differences she realizes that make Karen an interesting time capsule.

The conditions that allow her different view of the 1997 society are related to the time gap. In the world’s perspective, chronological time is following its linearity and the

³⁰ ORLANDI, 1999, p. 53 “o sujeito significa em condições determinadas, impelido, de um lado, pela língua e, de outro, pelo mundo, pela sua experiência, por fatos que reclamam sentidos, e também por sua memória discursiva, por um saber/poder/dever dizer, em que os fatos fazem sentido por se inscreverem em

characters feel its passage, interacting with one another and living within the changing culture on a daily basis. Karen, on the other hand, cannot feel the time dimension in her unconscious state. In terms of experience through time, she has had none during the coma and is therefore fast-forwarded 17 years. She has been in a deep coma state and her brain does not give signals of any functioning not even when she gives birth to Megan going “through the birth with nary an indicating flicker of higher brain function” (p. 55). Not being aware of anything, especially history, she is the only person to experience the cultural changes of 17 years at the same time.

Coupland is able to show the materiality of meaning production when putting 1979 to interpret 1997, metaphorically speaking. There is no meaning without interpretation, which is conditioned by a given cultural context, for “...language, meaning or subjects are not transparent: they have their own materiality and are constituted in processes in which language, history and ideology happen altogether” (ORLANDI, 1999, p. 48)³¹.

One could argue that Karen’s criticism of the cultural values in 1997 could derive from a debilitation in her brain because of the long coma. However, the doctors who checked her after she woke up affirmed that “her brain functions were fully normal, as was her memory” (p. 164). The healthy condition of her brain reinforces the actual meeting of 1979 and 1997 as they are perceived by Karen.

Upon her waking on November 1st, 1997, there is the juxtaposition of time in the same topic space. It is Karen with cultural values of 1979 now living in 1997. This condition allows Karen to have a sharper view of society; she notices that her friends “seem to be working too hard. The whole world seems to be working too hard” (p. 143). As for leisure and free time, she thinks that they were “important aspects of life, but these qualities seem utterly absent from the world she now sees in both real life and on TV” (p. 143). She is annoyed with the emphasis people give to things:

“Look at this! Look at this! People are always showing Karen new electronic doodads. They talk about their machines as though they possess a charmed religious quality – as if these machines are supposed to compensate for their owner’s inner failings. Granted, these new things are wonders – e-mail, faxes, and cordless phones – but then still... big deal” (p. 143).

formações discursivas que representam no discurso as injunções ideológicas”

³¹ ORLANDI, 1999, p.48 “nem a linguagem, nem os sentidos nem os sujeitos são transparentes: eles têm sua materialidade e se constituem em processos em que a língua, a história e a ideologia concorrem conjuntamente”

Space/environment is negatively modified by time/history. The new society seems dystopian to Karen because she sees 'hardness' in modern people, "Those little moments of goofiness that used to make the day pass seem to have gone. Life's so serious now" (p. 154). The excessive seriousness of life is related to some aspects of work, "Husbands and wives both work" (p. 154); kids, "Kids are farmed out to schools and video games" (p. 154); leisure, "nobody even has hobbies these days" (p. 154); alienation "Nobody seems to be able to endure simply being by themselves, either – but at the same time they're isolated" (p. 154); lack of personal contact because people "send e-mail rather than calling or writing a note or visiting each other" (p. 154); and thirst for money "winning contracts" (p. 155). The impressions Karen has of the 1997 society are not just hallucinations or nostalgia, and can be applied to this society because its ethos demands working efficiency or high performance. The new environment imposes a machine-like behavior filled with the characteristics pointed by Karen. An intense use of drugs and alcoholism demonstrates that the environment has become unhealthy.

Outside human time and ideology, the vertical plan remains vigilant of this society's misleading path, and it is moved by the misery of life's meaning. But, this regarding is not reciprocal, for in the narrative, humanity does not seem to care about the existence of another plan. Nobody is portrayed with any kind of religion, or belief in transcendence, "And now there's only the *system*. All other options have evaporated. For most people it's the System or what... *death?* There is nothing." (p. 155). The system is laic, democratic and capitalist, in which there is freedom for any kind of religion, but there does not seem to be any interest in it. The rare references the characters make to it are simply colloquial expressions of language, for instance, when Karen says "God may be watching" (p. 19). In fact, in this society there is not "even religion" (p. 155). Nevertheless, the divine plan can continuously see the human society using its powers, as Jared says: "I have been watching my friends over the past year or so..." (p. 234), "I was up there hearing you." (p. 268), he has been delegated this specific mission. The divine seems to care enough about humans that it takes action.

At the end of the narrative, the going backward in time and reviving humanity is the most fantastic event. It can only be regarded as verisimilar because the divine entity has an almighty source of power and is willing to do whatever it takes to fix humanity's problems. Chronological time is rewound about two years to November 1st, 1997, the day when Karen was supposed to wake up. Only the main characters can keep their memory

of these events, so they may perform Plan B³².

2.3. The narrators: multiple points of view

In current fiction “the narrators are disturbingly multiple” (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 29)³³, and this characteristic is consonant to the desired effect of a variable and plural perspective, according to the scholar.

Jared is the first narrator. He is also a character of the narrative as a ghost. The narration is in first person and starts at the end of the story with a description of how his character died of leukemia. But, although his health condition was dreary in the hospital, the tone of his narration is quite joyous, and shows his great sexual appetite when he was human:

... I was too weak to properly respond to my being hit on by carloads of Betties and Veronicas—all except for the cheeky Cheryl Anderson who gave me ‘manual release’ the day I lost my eyebrows... pg 4.

His language is articulated as if, in spite of being a ghost now, he maintains the same attitude he had as a teenager in Vancouver. The difference that cannot go unnoticed is that he has a large perspective on life for he can make existentialist comments on the meaning of life, for instance, when he says he believes “that unless a person passes through some Great Experience, that person’s life will have been for naught.” (p. 04). We can only assume that this clarity on life’s meaning derives from the perspective he was obtained since he went to the vertical plan. Both as a character and a narrator, he is not human any longer, and does not belong to the same syntagmatic axis (horizontal plan) as the other characters. He is not concealed by their ideology formation, either. He is endowed with a sharper and broader vision of human life.

³² Plan B corresponds to the applying of Plan A (a radical questioning of social rules and procedures, posed by GC-god to cope with individualism) plus the keeping of Karen in coma as a reminder of their mission. Plan B is instituted because the characters failed to have the initiative to discuss serious issues during the world coma.

³³ HUTCHEON, 1987, p. 29 “os narradores passam a ser perturbadoramente múltiplos”

The author mixes at least two distinct language tones in Jared's comments, which in my view, work to balance each other, i.e. to compensate for the excesses they may entail. Besides well humored and thoughtful sentences like the ones above, there are disturbingly scary descriptions of the environment of the deteriorated world after its 'end':

Endless cars and trucks and minivans sit on road shoulders harboring cargoes of rotted skeletons. Homes across the world collapse and fall inward on themselves; pianos, couches and microwaves tumble through floors, exposing money and love notes hidden within the floorboards. Most foods and medicines have time-expired. The outer world is eroded by rain, and confused by lightning. Fires still burn, of course, and the weather now tends to extremes. (p. 4)

In the first chapter a heavy load of mystery and expectation is implied with such news of the world's end. The scenery is one of total chaos, deterioration and desolation. There is silence too, indicative of no humans anymore, except for some of Jared's friends, "This is the place my old friends came to inhabit as well—my friend who grew old while I got to remain forever young" (p. 5). No further detail is provided on what may have caused the annihilation of the world; Jared keeps mystery by allowing only a partial vision of events. He shows some of the consequences and hides the causes.

Still in the first chapter, there is a foreshadowing of the book's end. Jared comments that "Most people don't learn things along the way. Or if they do, they conveniently forget those things when it suits their needs" (p. 5). And, on the same token, he concludes by showing how stubborn people are in order to learn their lessons in life:

Most people, given a second chance, fuck it up completely. It's one of those laws of the universe that you can't shake. People, I have noticed, only seem to learn once they get their third chance—after losing and wasting vast sums of time, money, youth, and energy—you name it. But still they learn, which is the better thing in the end. (p. 5)

This maxim can be applied to the entire narrative since the plot is organized around it. Jared says this is "the story of friends of mine who finally learned their lesson" (p. 5). The reader is sure the characters are going to learn their lesson, whatever it is, but it is not going to be without pain and trouble. There is no action in this first chapter, but Jared seems to be a herald for the reader, building up expectation with questions like: "But how did I end up here? And how long am I to stay here?" (p. 5).

After narrating the first chapter, Jared appears again only at the end of the novel as

both narrator and character. In fact, most of the story is told in flashback, since the narrator says he is at the end of the world in the first chapter, and when he assumes narration again on page 211, the world, as the characters knew it, has already ended. So, 'narration', the artistic display of the fictional episodes, does not start with the 'plot', the chronological sequence of the facts. The first chapter is an introduction to the plot, which starts only in the second chapter. I continue discussing Jared's narration later because he is the first and last narrator of the story.

Richard is the narrator of the second chapter on page 7 until the end of Part 1 on page 108. He narrates in first person perspective and is the main character as Karen's boyfriend. As narrator and protagonist, Richard takes turn describing the environment, giving voice to the other characters in dialogues, or digging into his own mind.

Richard's narration shows how the characters, including him, a young adult, always lacked something in life, as already indicated by Jared's narrating voice in the first chapter. As first person narrator, he is limited to what he can see. Most of the text in this section is in the form of quotations, i.e., the focus of narration is to provide space for the characters to speak in their own voice. Not much judgment is made by this narrator, instead, it is up to the reader to analyze the characters based on their own words. Examples abound: Hamilton, another character, explains why he takes drugs: "Life is only so exciting, Richard. And it soon becomes a drag... ..Heroin's not a meaning, but it *does* make life feel as though life still has possibilities" (p. 95), or Pam, Karen's close friend, talks about the collapse of her modeling career: "There's only a small fraction of 'me' left. I used to think there was an infinite supply of 'me.'" (p. 75). In this way, representation surfaces more than narration.

Richard is careful to reproduce the colloquial expressions of all characters, and sometimes he even explains the different accents, "'Cor fricking blimey. No one needs this.' (Hamilton was in his phase of only renting British VHS tapes, thus Anglicizing his diction.)" (p. 84).

The third-person omniscient narrator assumes narration on page 111 and goes on until page 208, which corresponds to Part 2 of the story. He starts at a key moment: right when Karen wakes up from a coma that lasted seventeen years, ten months, and seventeen days.

The first paragraph of his narration is a talk with the reader. He invites the reader to imagine how such a long coma may dislocate someone from current culture:

"Quickly, quickly your memory freezes—a tiny perfect iceberg, all memories

frozen, locked. Your family. Your sex. Your name—all of it: turned into a silent ice block. You are free of your memory: You now look at the world with the eyes of an embryo, not knowing, only seeing and only hearing.” (p. 111)

Differently from Richard, this narrator makes much more use of his voice to tell the story because he has total access to the characters minds. If in the first part of the book Richard uses dialogue to convey opinions, with this narrator there are long paragraphs revealing the most intimate thoughts and feelings of others. He plunges unlimited into the mind of all of the characters. Most of the time, he is showing the character’s flux of mind. When he is talking about Wendy, he says, “She wonders if she entered medicine only so that she might see naked men’s bodies with impunity. This thought frightens her” (p. 159). By having access to the mind of the characters through the narrator, we can perceive actual feelings, and better understand their personality. With the previous narrator, Richard, the reader does not have access to the characters’ minds. The characters’ speeches cannot be taken as their actual thoughts because they can be manipulated in language to hide feelings, information, etc. Thus, interpretation becomes harder without a direct access to characters’ conscience. The examples below show this difference. The first one is when Karen is being interviewed on TV by Gloria:

“‘What about your body — how do you feel now that it’s’—pause—‘so *different* than the way it was in 1979?’ Gloria has been drilling for tears and is annoyed at the lack of a geyser. She mistakes Karen’s disbelieving pauses at Gloria’s rude intrusions for emotion. ‘Do you *miss* your body?’” (p. 164)

The omniscient narrator shows the media’s crave for sensationalism disguised in a simple question. Another example of the narrator’s role in explaining emotions is when Megan, Karen’s rebellious daughter, talks to her mother, “‘Crap—*Mom*.’ Megan loves saying Mom with extra vim, as each mention is a small stab at Lois [Karen’s mother]” (p. 139). The intonation Megan uses on the word “Mom” has a strong meaning, but it is too subtle to be guessed without the narrator’s explanation.

The reader may anticipate fantastic events from the first page of the novel when the narrator, Jared, affirms he is a ghost and foreshadows the end of the world. Besides this, the precision with which the predictions in Karen’s prophetic letter to Richard come true, point to a metaphysical world acting upon the physical world in the narrative. The facts leading to the world coma are described by the omniscient narrator, from page 111 on, with specific details, reporting the actual panic and horror that ensues during a major disaster

that could happen in the horizontal plan. In the excerpt below, the description of the scenario is realistic with reference to the cold war:

“Lois watched the shoppers panic. The man behind her squeezed his full cart through the space behind the clerk and left the store without paying. Lois, like some shoppers, moved out of the checkout area and stood silently in one of the main aisles to watch the scene unfold. Two more shoppers keeled over; the mall’s tiny first-aid post lost its ability to cope with trauma. From some unknown corner, a siren, dormant since the days of the USSR, woke up frightened and cranky.” (p. 182)

Jared narrates from page 211 to the end of the novel on page 284, which constitutes Part 3, the final one. Just like in the first chapter of the book, he is a first-person omniscient narrator. He has access to the characters’ minds because of his powers as a ghost.

The routine of the characters during the one-year world coma is not described in details, but summarized briefly with a few examples of their routine in a single paragraph:

“Between tapes what do they do? They have money fights, lobbying and tossing Krugerrands, rubies and thousand-dollar bills at each other, at other times they make paper airplanes from prints by Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein and shoot them into the fireplace.” (p. 211, 212)

Jared’s tone of voice in the narration shows a) humor – “...lock up you daughters. And your smutty magazines. And your sofa, for God’s sake, because you never know, I may go and hump it like a Great Dane. Har *har*.” (p. 211); b) raw descriptions of the severely deteriorated world – “Before them is a wide, faded tar piazza strewn with skeletons, cars parked at odd angles, and rusted shopping carts.” (p. 213), and descriptions of the characters’ minds – “She thinks back on the past crazy year on drugs and then the miracle of becoming clean.” (p. 264); c) deep thought-provoking messages, sometimes addressing the reader and calling him/her for a chat – “But you know, every second of our life we’re reaching goals of some sort.” (p. 234); and, d) fantastic events of many sorts, like miracles his character performs, such as the healing of Megan’s blind and brain-defective daughter.

2.4. The characters: visions and privileges

The life of the characters lack meaning though they are barely aware of this. What they aim for in life is not clear to them and so they merely go along with the drive for money in their society. Richard is the protagonist of the story. He and the other main characters, Karen, Megan, Pamela, Wendy, Hamilton, and Linus are the ones chosen as agents of transformation in the world. They are spherical characters who have to go through an ordeal to be able to change their minds and learn how to fulfill their mission.

The whole story in GC seems to be a preparation for an action that is not reported in the book. The novel ends when the characters are finally prepared for their mission. As key elements in narrative structure, characters need to acquire competence to act effectively in the pursuit of their goals. In GC, no character is actually able to act because they lack all the basic components of competence.

The characters can be divided into three categories: a) 'Humans without perspective', b) 'Human with perspective', and c) 'Divine'.

Except for Karen, all human characters belong to the category 'Humans without perspective'. They are not special in any way "not being superior to others or their environment" (FRYE, 1973, p. 40)³⁴. The reader, then, has the impression of looking at them on the same level, neither to a higher nor a lower ranking person in comparison to the average. The same rules of probability that we notice in our human experience can be expected to be applied to them. It is with this group that the reader can identify himself/herself more directly because they are portrayed realistically. This group of characters does not have any 'perspective' in the sense that they can not realize their life conditions in society. They take their behavior for granted because they do not possess the analytical capacity of perspective, or looking from outside of their ideological context.

It is implied in the narrative that the social configuration of the capitalist system in which they live takes people to a meaningless life in this story. The characters become the accomplices of such a context because they passively let themselves be taken in without fighting the cultural practices that make their lives miserable.

The 'Divine' category is represented by Jared. He is a flat character because he does not change or learn anything. As he belongs to the vertical plan, he is the most powerful character in the novel – 'God' is alluded to by Jared, but he is not properly a character, he is more like a source of power and will. The other characters are not aware

³⁴ FRYE, 1973, p. 40 "não sendo superior aos outros e seu meio"

of him. He becomes manifest only at the very end of the story with two major functions: to explain God's plan and to perform miracles. A peculiarity of this character is that his sexual appetite is immense even as a ghost. He recognizes this by saying "...lock up your daughters. And your smutty magazines. And your sofa, for God's sake, because you never know, I may go and hump it like a great Dane, *Har har*." (p.211).

The category 'Human with perspective' is represented by Karen. In GC Karen is a young girl of 17 when she starts having dreams/visions of a terrifying future in which there is no meaning in life. She becomes the antennae between the horizontal and the vertical plan, bringing predictions she first shares with her boyfriend. Later, in her after-coma period, she even predicts the end of the world in an interview on a TV program.

Her life goes through dramatic changes for she is sentenced by God to a seventeen-year coma, and later she is sentence again to go back to the coma. But what has she done to deserve this punishment? Nothing she has done can legitimately entitle her to suffer so much, to be deprived of living from an early age.

The logic that rules Karen's suffering in the story is that "everything exceptional that happens to the hero should be unmatched with his/her character" (FRYE, 1973, p. 47)³⁵. The coming of tragedy is understood by the context of a society that is collectively guilty. The description of the characters is enough to understand the coming of tragedy: Richard as a drunk, Wendy, a workaholic, Pamela, Hamilton and Megan, drug addicts, Karen is anorexic because of fashion, and Lois is extremely selfish. They all manifest unhealthy behaviors, or have lives that have been wasted in some way. Karen is both innocent and guilty of her two condemnations. She is innocent because nothing that she has done is enough to justify the enduring suffering of being sentenced to go unconscious and be trapped on a bed depending on machines to aid her body's functioning. This state is worse than imprisonment or death, it is in fact the worst possible condemnation in the logic of the story, because if she were in jail she could at least have a conscience and some action, even though limited, or, if she died she would go to heaven which is the only and perfect destination. On the other hand, she is guilty because she belongs to a guilty society. As a part of it, she is chosen as a representative, and becomes a Christ-like figure, the one who bears all sins and must suffer terribly to compensate society's wrongdoings. The irony in her destiny is that she is chosen arbitrarily. Karen herself asks Jared about her condition:

³⁵ FRYE, 1973, p. 47 "tudo de excepcional que aconteça com o herói devia estar casualmente descombinado com o seu caráter"

“Jared, tell me, what exactly is the *point* of everything that happened? And why did *I* go into a coma? I can’t explain *anything*. So maybe *you* can...

Well, Karen, you – how shall I say this – you accidentally opened certain doors. You were taking all those diet pills and starving yourself. Your brain did somersaults; you saw things; you caught a glimpse of things to come.

For *that* I lost my youth?” (p. 214, 215)

Intrinsically, she is no more entitled to being the ‘escapegoat’ than anybody else. Any member of this community is entitled to receive such a role. The fact that she writes on a note to Richard that she “wanted to sleep for ‘a thousand years’” (p. 215) is not enough to condemn her more than the others, but it was the excuse Jared would tell her “*You* [she] chose this, not me or anybody else” (p. 215). Nevertheless, Karen does not choose to be sacrificed so humanity may have a new chance. The chances fall on her, and her exclusive martyrdom grants some dignity to her character for being the bridge to salvation.

Between the categories of characters two donations occur. Jared donates his miracles to aid humans and his services as a messenger from the vertical plan. Karen has no option and donates her life as a reminder of the characters’ mission. These donations are the ingredients for their empowerment and action.

3. FROM DYSTOPIA TO PEDAGOGY

3.1. Configurations of a dystopian society

The characters present some careless, destructive attitudes that show how their society has become dystopian. They are overworking, addiction to drugs and alcohol, anorexia, and individualism/alienation.

3.1.1. Overworking

Overworking is a pervasive behavior and I discuss it briefly here because it has already been identified in the previous chapters. Most of the characters' time is dedicated to working. Instead of being beneficial to them, it becomes a villain because it is excessive. The vigor of the other areas of life are drained and directed to work. As it contributes to having access to products and services, there is a general attitude of submission to hard work. A different reason for overworking is emotional, "Through the monsters they design and the TV show they work on, they give vent to the loss they feel inside" (p. 137). The vast majority of people focus their time and energy to working in such a way that it dwarfs

other important aspects of life such as leisure and relationships.

3.1.2. Addiction to drugs and alcohol

Another characteristic of this society is the use of drugs and alcohol. Hamilton, for instance, is under constant influence of diverse kinds of drugs, such as “Mexican pot of the weakest caliber” (p. 16), but he is not alone “Roughly ten of Hamilton’s drug buddies were toking furiously” (ibid). As a narrator, Richard tells how drugs are used as therapy by the characters:

We had a few cigarettes and Linus had bargain-basement dime-bag skunkweed pot, which was all we needed for that moment. So we zoomed off to the canyon forest below Rabbit Lane. There, we parked the cars, walked down into the canyon’s windless soggy greens where the tall trees above shielded us from the wet harsh weather, and we were calmed.” (p. 31)

Nature here appears as an escape from the pressures of civilization, but the calm environment it offers is only used to fool the laws of society because it is the ideal place for taking drugs. Nature’s beauty is not enjoyed nor does it serve as an inspiration. It is all around, as the canyon landscape suggests, but it cannot be felt because Richard and Linus are intoxicated with marijuana. Drugs are being used as a ‘soothing therapy’, not nature. They are ‘calmed’ but it indicates a temporary dislocation from reality that will not teach them any valuable lesson. In fact, it alienates them even more.

Pam, who pursues a modeling career, has a routine that includes “Clothes. Dinners. Drugs. More drugs.” (p. 74). Megan starts smoking while very young and this behavior is not hers alone. Richard meets her on the streets, “She was with two other thirteen-year-old girlfriends and one boyfriend, all puffing away on ciggies” (p. 84). Even though this is not an illicit drug, it is still a type of drug because individuals become addicted, and this represents a gateway to illicit ones. Pam uses illicit drugs as well. As a teenager of 16 she could not drink alcohol, but after an argument with her grandmother, Lois, she disappears and is found passed out on a bench by “The police constable [who] said she’d been drinking heavily. ‘There was an empty rum bottle there’.” (p. 98). Megan was on drugs too. The police searched her purse and “found a large amount of pot and some psilocybin mushrooms.” (ibid). At school she finds a boyfriend who shares the same addiction.

Richard goes to her school to drop some documents only to discover that “He [Skitter, the boyfriend] and Megan were off for lunch (drugs) somewhere over on Lonsdale.” (p. 99). Upon commenting on the difference of drug used in the 70s and the 90s, Richard says

“Drugs were so different than when I was young. Pot was once a few giggles, munchies, spaciness for a few hours, then a headache. Modern drugs – previously unknown acid molecules, dimethyl tryptamine, crack – were a parent’s most fearful imaginings made compact and simple.” (p. 98)

This indicates how drugs developed into more powerful and dangerous substances threatening especially the young. The advance of technology allowed the introduction of new and interesting gadgets, but it has, as well, enabled the fabrication of more seducing drugs for a cheaper price.

Hamilton says that “Heroin’s not a meaning, but it does make life feel as though life still has possibilities.” (p. 95). By inverting his sentence there is: ‘life without heroine does not feel like having possibilities’. Hamilton becomes so addicted to it that once when he and Pam have an overdose and are “lying on the floor, bone-white, jaws agape” (p. 113), and are helped by paramedics, he complains about being helped back to reality: “You stupid bastard, Teddy,’ Hamilton shouts. ‘That was the best fucking high I’ve ever had. Why the hell did you go and fuck it up?’” (ibid). Being as addicted as he is, Pam says “Oh, shit’... ...’It was feeling so good.” (ibid).

Besides the characters’ addiction to drugs, there are textual indications that using drugs has become widespread in society. On the same day that Karen wakes up from the coma and Hamilton and Pam are saved from their overdose, in the same hospital, another person arrives and “He is also screaming at the top of his lungs, telling everybody to fuck off and demanding more heroin.” (p. 114). Drug abuse has become endemic, “Heroine’s big these days” (p. 119) Linus says.

Although Hamilton and Pam seek help at Narcotics Anonymous, their lives have been obviously damaged by the influence of drugs. Their house is an indicative of the mess their lives have become:

“They live in a bedroom of un-rewound VCR tapes, rancid yogurt containers, empty prescription bottles, color-coded vitamin jars, half-eaten meals, lipsticked napkins, stained blankets, and half-read magazines and books. Wendy oversees their recovery.” (p. 143)

The influence of drugs on the characters and by extension, on the whole society of

the novel is terrible. Hamilton and Pam demonstrate how disturbed drug addicts can get even after they have stopped using it, Pam “is in rehab” (p. 73). While Linus was spending a “few years gadabouting the southern United States, growing his beard, doing spare jobs for food” (p. 72). In an effort to escape the everyday world, he says in a letter to Richard “There’s drugs, but you know, I’ve never seen anybody who’s been improved by drugs. Life seems both too long and too short.” (ibid). This social symptom of drug use is a key element to be considered, for the search of such an escape from reality is motivated by a strong discomfort in life. Such pathological behavior, described in the story, works as a side effect of the society’s cultural practice because the shrinking of life to overworking became sickening. This problem and all its consequences built up a motivation for an intervention of the divine.

Attached to the drug theme is alcoholism. The protagonist, Richard, cannot control anxiety, frustration, and loneliness and he cannot help but make use of alcohol. As a narrator, he recalls his addiction and seeks the causes of it:

“After some years I realized I’d landed myself a major drinking problem – a device for coping with life’s endlessly long days. I truly wondered if I was in some kind of coma myself, shambling through life with an IV drip filled with Scotch. My twenties were vanishing and the only good thing I had going for me was a daughter who I hardly ever saw.” (p. 71)

His addiction only enlarges his problems and he gets into embarrassing situations: he would wake up after a drinking binge to discover that he had peed onto a wall, or not remembering at all where he had parked his car. At work or to his friends, he could maintain “a good front while inner deterioration grew” (p. 72). His addiction problems are worse than most characters can perceive because on the outside many people can still pretend something they are not. Karen, with the gift of perspective right after her coma, is able to realize this misleading representation:

“It’s how confident everybody comes across these days. Everybody looks like they’re raring to go all the time. People look confident even when they’re buying chewing gum or walking the dog.

You like that then?

There is more. You take these same confident-looking people and ask them a few key questions and suddenly you realize that they’re despairing about the world – that the confidence is a mask.” (p. 165)

Novels that disrupt current culture make it by criticizing specific recognizable issues, e.g., drugs and alcoholism. Such novels, as cultural artifacts, do not belong to the signified pole of culture - the one taken for granted by mainstream ideology – but to the signifying pole, according to Sant’Anna (1977). The signified pole of a capitalist culture will support, cherish hardwork. This novel takes precisely this key notion as its target. The signifying dimension pointed above represents the critical positioning it assumes when it tackles such a core issue for the capitalist system. The fictional universe created is a simulacrum of human life in the form of a textual object, an organism with 284 pages that can be perused and analyzed as a metaphor of the empirical world. Most facts in it are not historical but constitute representations by which important themes are discussed effectively in art form.

3.1.3. Anorexia

Instead of adopting a healthy diet or following nutrition education, some characters develop an unhealthy relationship with food that can be related to anorexia. This condition is a “pathology of the reflexive self-control, operating around an axis of self-identity and corporal appearance, in which shame develops a preponderant role”, (GIDDENS, 2002, p. 101)³⁶. This is yet another identifiable individual characteristic that is a signal in the dystopian society of the novel. It instills terrible consequences on people’s bodies and personalities.

Karen has such a food disorder. She has actually avoided food almost completely to become slimmer:

“Karen, you’re not *still* hell-bent on starvation, are you?’

‘Karen had been obsessed with Hawaii and dieting. ‘Richard, *Beb*, I’ve just *got* to be a size five by next week or I won’t fit into my new Hawaii swimsuit.’” (p. 16)

She feels the need to get thinner and gives the excuse of her new swimsuit, which was intentionally bought smaller than her actual size. Her mother, Lois, has influenced her

³⁶ GIDDENS, 2002, p. 101 “uma patologia do autocontrole reflexivo, operando em torno de um eixo de auto-identidade e aparência corporal, em que a vergonha desempenha papel preponderante”

to severe dieting. Karen tells Pam she “was raised on pills; Mom’s a walking pharmacy” (p. 17). When Karen falls into a coma, Lois admits “she was the pusher” (p. 27) of her daughter’s diet. She had always been taught by her mother the need to be thin for aesthetic reasons. But, as the dialogue above shows, what she is doing is not simply dieting: her habit has been so severe that Richard calls it ‘starvation’. She would not eat much, and her friends remark: “We tried to make her throw up, but there couldn’t have been more than half a French fry inside her, tops” (p. 27), and according to Wendy, on top of not eating, she even takes diet pills.

Karen disastrously mixes alcohol and acute dieting. Wendy warns her of the dangers: “Are you sure you want to drink, Kare? I mean you’re looking kinda frail. All you’ve eaten today is a Ritz cracker and half a can of Tab” (p. 18), but she does it anyway. The result of this mixture is a strong headache, which is treated with more medicine – she takes two Valiums. She does not have a fat body, her boyfriend Richard tells her: “I think you look great; you’ve got a great body, you’re perfect the way you are” (p.19). Her diet is definitely not adopted for any health benefit. On the contrary, it is visibly harmful because she looks ‘frail’. She can not admit herself looking fat, even though she is not. The compulsive self-torture she goes through enslaves her in a kind of never-ending dieting cycle.

Lois has been over-concerned about dieting since she was teenager. She is “a former Miss Canada runner-up (1958), [and] saw food as alien, alive, requiring passports, visas, and security guards before allowing entry into the mouth” (p. 40). Pam is described as “thin as water streaming from a tap” (p. 18), and “wafer-thin” (p. 17). She says her “mom gives them [pills] to me [her] all the time” (ibid). Her mother, just like Karen’s, stimulates extreme dieting, one that goes beyond food avoidance to include chemicals that accelerate weight loss. All this evidence shows that these characters are dominated by this compulsion and are never satisfied with any result. Dieting is an end in itself. It can make life miserable because no character that diets is ever satisfied with his/her body because

“In the long search for aptitude there is no time for resting, and all celebration of momentary successes is not more than an interval before another hard work round. Something the ones who search for ‘aptitude’ know for sure is that they are not enough apt yet, and that they must keep trying. The search for aptitude is a state of minute self-examining, and perpetual self-denying and self-depreciation, and thus of continuous anxiety too” (BAUMAN, 2001, p. 92)³⁷.

³⁷ BAUMAN, 2001, p. 92 “Na longa busca pela aptidão não há tempo para descanso, e toda celebração de sucessos momentâneos não passa de um intervalo antes de outra rodada de trabalho duro, Uma coisa que

Anorexia imposes a continuous sacrifice never allowing perfection because it is always possible to be a little thinner. As the characters get very thin, they are trapped in this negative process of concern, worry and apprehension. These sentiments are present in the description of these three characters that have anorexia. Mental/physical sickness conditions their lives to fit a certain pattern.

3.1.4. Individualism

Another negative characteristic identified in the characters is individualism/alienation. Richard recognizes that he and Karen “rarely had conversations of true depth” (p. 10). During her coma, Richard eventually meets his friends but there were “countless silent moments” (p. 70). In a conversation between him and Pam they say

“It’s just that I’m... I’m....’

‘What, Pam? What?’

A whisper: ‘Lonely.’

‘I know. Me, too.’” (p. 74)

They confess to each other they feel lonely, which indicates how alienated they are even when surrounded by people. This lack of involvement or closeness among them evidences the loss of bonding, love, caring, etc. Another example is Karen’s parents’ relationship. There is no communication or love between them: “Mrs. McNeil, the fevered shrew who drove the quiet, honorable George out of his own home. Neither of them could be described as ‘happy.’” (p. 40). Hamilton’ marriage with Cleo does not work out well either. He sees Pam again after years and “In six months it [his marriage] is legally over” (p. 75). In spite of being married to Cleo, he does not love her and discards her immediately.

During Karen’s coma, only Richard and Mr. McNeil “became the two regular visitors” (p. 43). Besides them nobody else bothers to visit her. Even her mother neglects her

os que buscam a ‘aptidão’ sabem com certeza é que ainda não estão suficientemente aptos, e que devem continuar tentando. A busca da aptidão é um estado de auto-exame minucioso, auto-recriminação e auto-depreciação permanentes, e assim também de ansiedade contínua”

daughter when her granddaughter is born: “For Mrs. McNeil, Karen was forgotten almost altogether as she pressed her nose up against the glass wall of the nursery window, then cooed at the baby” (p. 55).

Besides alienation, Richard shows how relationships can be disastrous in this society: “Mr. Phillips down the road was a manic depressive wife beater... ..Mr. Pulaski perved out on all his kids and that’s why they beat him up one night and left him facedown in a ditch on Good Friday” (p. 39). Richard can give examples of bad relationships that happened near his house and these accounts work as a microcosm of the whole society.

All the loneliness and the consequent lack of warm feelings among the characters had “settled [them] into a premature autumn of life” (p. 79), and when Richard thinks of that he says he “wanted to *thaw* the snow. I [he] wanted to *reorder* this world. I [he] did *not* want to be old before my [his] time” (ibid). The words *snow* and *old* here belong to the same semantic field of loneliness.

At another moment when Richard gets a job in the film industry he is trying to talk to Hamilton because he wants to give him some advice concerning his and Pam’s drug addiction:

“‘Since when life is a *drag*, Hamilton? Things are going well. Things have never been so good.’

He made a *pfffft* noise and shot me a patronizing glance that made me feel eight years old, like I’d felt when I hid my mother’s cigarettes to make her stop smoking. He sat on the bed. ‘Don’t you understand, Richard? There’s nothing at the center of what we do.’” (p. 95)

It is evident that there is a painful emptiness in his life. In this sequence, Hamilton’s sense of individuality is strong enough to reject Richard’s advice, and the conversation by saying “just let us be” (p. 95) and “Good night, Reverend” (ibid) in clearly an ironic tone. Hamilton does not admit anybody interfering in his life, and he ends up leaving Richard with a “sick feeling that accompanies a recently bruised friendship” (ibid) and does not open his heart to him.

In addition, Lois expels Megan from her house because they do not get along well: “She can’t stay here. This is it. I love her, but she’s lost to me.” (p. 98). This demonstrates that she considers her granddaughter disposable. If Megan has troubles with drugs, throwing her out can only make things worse, but Lois does this anyway because Megan has failed in substituting Karen as a good, obedient daughter. Thus, Megan cannot serve Lois’s purposes any longer. Lois is so selfish that she is not willing to take the time and

trouble to help Megan. On the other hand, Megan does not respect her grandmother, “I sell your ugly little owl figurines one by one to collectors, *Grandma*.” (p. 97); her teachers, “I told my English teacher to go fuck up a rope” (p. 98); nor her father, Richard: Skitter screamed to Megan, “‘just take off, okay?’ She was in the passenger seat and refused to look at me.” (p. 99). This last situation happens when Richard meets her boyfriend by accident.

Richard is a failure as a father because he is “so shiftless in helping raise Megan.” (p. 139). So, again there is no bonding, and no relationship is established between characters.

A week after Karen is awake from her coma, she asks Pam if she is happy with her life:

“‘No.’
 ‘Fulfilled?’
 ‘No.’
 ‘Creative?’
 ‘A little.’” (p. 137)

Not being able to be happy in their relationships they seek a compensation in their job activity “Through the monsters they design and the TV show they work on, they give vent to the loss they feel inside.” (ibid). But this behavior does not restore relationships at a personal level. In this world of stark relations, machines seem to have substituted human engagement. Karen asks Hamilton

“‘are you new and improved and faster and better, too? I mean, as a result of your fax machine?’
 ‘It’s swim or drown, Kare. You’ll get used to them.’
 ‘Oh, *will* I?’
 ‘It’s not up for debate. We lost. Machines won.’” (p. 143)

There is a general surrender to this reality devoid of intimacy. At the same time it sounds humoristic, it is an acknowledgement of an ongoing process in which people assume some machine traits, with no feelings on the one hand, and high working precision on the other.

Alienation is also present in Jared’s death for Wendy loved him and is brutally derived of him; and Karen’s coma splits her and Richard. As a consequence, they get

involved in other relationships that do not get deep enough because they cannot forget the ones that are away either by death or coma.

These four issues, overworking, addiction to drugs and alcohol, anorexia, and individualism/alienation constitute the worst problems that make the society in GC dystopian. They are exposed here to be evidenced and recognized as the motives that justify the divine entity's intervention in the story.

3.2. The power of ideology: Identity as a process

The characters in GC represent a fragment of the social world of the novel, and it is necessary to identify what lies at the basis of the four issues presented above, in order to understand why there is so much suffering and the establishment of a depressive atmosphere. Also, if the agent(s) of evil is/are revealed, it may be possible to understand why the divine intervenes so deeply in the human plan. This brings us back to the discussion on the meaning of ideology and identity, carried out in the first chapter.

Working, selling and profit are central issues in any capitalist society. The dominant ideology formation portrayed in the narrative is congruent with the one associated with late capitalism as defined by Bauman (2001) in terms of the importance of money for the acquisition of technological goods. This materialistic logic is assumed by the characters, and most of them plunge into it because underlying ideology works to justify this behavior. Now, it is not that the novel advocates against work, but it strives to show how such a positive value for the development of any society – diligent work - may slyly erode into a severe reduction of life's quality and diversity. In her criticism of the society of 1997, Karen refers to the several gadgets available for buying. Also, there is eagerness and expectation in people (or rather consumers) to purchase them. This buying impulse can only be satiated with money that comes from working. Extra hours mean more money. But where does this crave come from? The companies that produce these gadgets want to sell them in large scale. A convincing advertising campaign is essential for succeeding in sales. This is one of the most powerful channels this society has for conveying the mainstream ideology that compels people to "get get get" (p. 155) as Karen notices. People's routine is summarized as "work, watch TV, and sleep" (p. 154). At work they get the money to spend on the products advertised on TV, and sleeping recharges them for a new day of working and buying. When Hamilton says that "Machines won." (p. 143), it means 'the ideology of

consumerism won'. The working/buying cycle has monopolized this society that can not get away from it because neither of these activities is intrinsically foul. However, if machines/consumerism won, people lost, and the whole book is organized to show this. The avid buying impulse of 'get get get' fuels overworking.

Representation and identity are connected in any society. The first exerts a determining influence over the latter through symbolic systems. The meanings produced by representations, with a focus here on the ones broadcast by the media, provide evidence of social behavior, even with the potential to forge it:

"Representation, understood as a cultural process, establishes individual and collective identities. The social symbols on which it is based provide possible answers to the questions: Who am I? What could I be? Who do I want to be? The discourses and the representation systems construct the places from where the individuals can be located and speak", (WOODWARD, 2000, p. 17)³⁸.

The book focuses on the behavior of the characters exposing their problems as they live and work in society. This is on the surface of the story being told. The careful reader can infer the causes for their entropic conduct. Entropy is the "moving toward no enchanted future, but toward a darkness from which comes no morning. Entropy is evolution in reverse." (SYPHER, 1962, p. 74). Based on the concepts of identity, representation, and ideology it is possible to say that within the capitalist regime there are ideological forces that, by means of representation, have led the characters and everyone else on the planet to proceed as has been described in the above analysis. The narratives of publicity can

"construct new identities as, for example, the 'new man' of the 1980s and 1990s... ...The media tells us how we should occupy a particular subject-position – the 'smart' adolescent the rising worker or the sensible mother. The propaganda is only 'effective' in its goal of selling things if it has an appeal to the consumers and if it provides images with which they can identify with". (id., p. 18)

The biggest problem in this society is that ideology is invisible to the characters. It is not clear what blocks a good reading or analysis of it, but the whole context of technology

³⁸ WOODWARD, 2000, p. 17 "A representação, compreendida como um processo cultural, estabelece identidades individuais e coletivas e os sistemas simbólicos nos quais ela se baseia fornecem possíveis respostas às questões: Quem sou eu? O que eu poderia ser? Quem eu quero ser? Os discursos e os sistemas de representação constroem os lugares a partir dos quais os indivíduos podem se posicionar e a partir dos quais podem falar"

advancement seems to give them a sense that progress is happening or that things in general are improving as well. However, the characters keep resorting to severe dieting, for instance, because fashion/propaganda indicates that slimness is beautiful and fatness is ugly. Appearance, within a specific aesthetics concept, becomes so important that Lois, for instance, at the moment Megan is born says “So perfect. *Nothing* like a Cesarean for a perfectly shaped baby’s head.” (p. 55). Already at birth, cultural values surround the newborn, as a set of rules to be followed. The characters and society in general are not able to reach the conscience to question these values. They do not seem to have the necessary conditions for breaking up with cultural trends even when these are harmful.

Beauty becomes tyrannical when there is an established standard and anybody who does not fit in feels ashamed of him/herself or even guilty somehow. Richard says that

“...Karen must have gingerly yet effectively pursued a life-long campaign to avoid being photographed. Her preoccupation with the deficiencies her mother kept telling her she had: *Your nose is too plump; your hair’s too straight; you’re pretty enough but no beauty.*” (p. 37)

Lois can only say her own daughter is not beautiful in comparison to the cultural beauty ideals she has learned within the ideological context. Thus, her mother influences her negatively by influencing Karen’s identity with a low self-esteem. In adolescence, she behaved trying to shape her own body within the established parameters of body shape. For this reason she ends up becoming anorexic. Karen is compelled by ideology (her mother is included here as an agent) to engage in a lifestyle that may provide her a better acceptance in society. The ‘new’ body could elevate her self-esteem providing it met fashion requirements. As a member of this society, she is willing to endure starvation, even assuming risks to her health. Her behavior is rather a compulsion. So, Karen is partially conscious of what she submits herself to. She is aware of what she wants her body to become for she can see in the media pictures, videos, drawings, or texts, or by talking to others about the desired standards, but she is not aware that her desire for a slim body is not originally hers. She is taught to want it by fashion/ideology. The shame she feels of her body symbolized by the anorexia shows her rendition to these superficial cultural values, and she is ready to try anything not to feel this way.

In this society media is the main communication vehicle of cultural values and the manipulation of fashion and propaganda upon people. The characters assume the values,

lifestyle, costumes, habits, opinions, made public in the media as being theirs because they are totally conditioned by the values of capitalist ideology, and thus, are unable to see the dominating intentions of companies with selling needs. This masking occurs because what is culturally constructed is taken naturally by the subjects, according to Orlandi (1999).

In the TV interview Karen agrees on giving, the host is trying hard to make emotions surface. The same people that do not seem to have much emotion or feeling in their relationships are eager to see it on TV. Pam says “TV isn’t about information. It’s about emotion. People will be hearing your words, sure, but first they’ll be checking out your skin and hairdo.” (p. 161). More than Karen’s appearance “Gloria has been drilling for tears and is annoyed at the lack of a geyser.” (p. 164). Viewers, in the private world of their homes, wish to watch emotional scenes. Their position is comfortably safe for the fact that they are just voyeurs of other people’s dilemmas, and as such, they do not have to be involved in them but can still enjoy them. However, this practice isolates each one even more. At the same time that they are voyeurs of other people’s lives, they are object of voyeurism as well and suffer, therefore, from the absence of friendship. The massive use of drugs and alcohol makes evident that the members of this society have severe personal problems. It is as if they need drugs to feel emotions they are not capable of without them, or that their lifestyles do not offer healthy options for leisure, personal satisfaction or happiness.

In the story, the highlight is on the side effects of the capitalist system on the personal level. It shows how characters agonize alone and helpless because they lost the sense of otherness: “narcissism opposes to the commitment necessary to hold intimate relations; commitment puts restrictions to opportunities” (GUIDDENS, 2002, p. 158)³⁹. At the same time, being narcissistic does not mean each character can supply himself/herself with the satisfaction of their desires. They may try, and there is the example of heavy drug use, but this and other practices they engage in end up only bringing more discomfort and frustration than any improvement.

The plenty access to food, shelter, electronic products, etc., is not a problem for the characters. Material goods are more than enough because they can discard goods as new ones are introduced. But, this condition does not reflect the characters’ inner lives. In a few passages in the narrative, some characters are able to point out what seems to be lacking. When Hamilton tells Richard that there is no center in what they do, Richard thinks it over

³⁹ GUIDDENS, 2002, p. 158 “o narcisismo se opõe ao compromisso necessário para sustentar relações íntimas; o compromisso coloca restrições às oportunidades”

hoping to find “some revelation that a center did exist.” (p. 96). But he cannot find an answer and feels lost and hopeless. Karen, with more clarity than the others, concludes that the people of 1997 do not have a “central core, which might give purpose to their lives.” (p. 156). They can verbalize it, though it does not mean they can come up with a possible solution to cope with their situation. The center in GC echoes what is discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation about the postmodern discredit of master narratives. They are all engaged in the regular activities of their society, such as studying and working, but they cannot find good reasons to live for. Coupland, however, does not provide a center for the characters in this novel. When Karen complains there is only the system in 1997, she reminds Richard that less than 20 years ago some other practices were possible like “bohemia or a creative underworld to join if mainstream life wasn’t your bad – or a life of crime, or even religion.” (p. 155). So, there is a change in the historical developments of the society depicted in the novel.

When Karen remembers instances of activities in which people felt they really belonged to something bigger than themselves, such as religion and bohemia, she acknowledges how important these institutions or practices were because they provided meaning to people’s lives. However, the book does not advocate a return to these previous practices. The past is remembered by Karen but she does not suggest a return to it. She is not able to point a solution either. In the narrative, this becomes the divine entity’s task.

Postmodern fiction works to discredit master narratives. In GC, Coupland shows how people in a society may feel lost when they lack substantial objectives, not only self-centered ones such as materialism, but goals for reaching objectives that are broader than the personal level. Individuality is a key element for the characters, and it is positive for them in many ways providing personal freedom. However, what surfaces more is individualism and not individuality.

As it becomes evident, the world in GC is full of risks that the characters are barely aware or not aware of at all. The term ‘crisis’ may describe the setting and the characters’ lives due to the symptoms highlighted here. It is not a momentary phase but a permanent condition for there is no hope for change coming from a human source. The society portrayed walks towards apathy and meaninglessness as clueless as an animal to the slaughterhouse.

It is interesting to notice that the amount of choices available for the characters is not enough to bring them happiness. By choices, I mean the relative freedom they have to choose their area of study, career, place to live, marital status, number of children, and others:

That September I enrolled in a business program at Capilano College, still muddy-brained about Megan and Karen and glad to have a productive way to occupy my waking hours. Our adult lives, good or bad, chugged ahead full-steam. No more traipsing through wilderness when ever we wanted. No classes to cut. Instead, there was rent, utilities, and taxes. Adolescent wishes of jobs in Hawaii or becoming a professional ski bum were replaced by newer, glossier pictures of giddy unregulated sex and adventurous metropolitan living. Wendy, to nobody's surprise, was intent on becoming a doctor, and off she went across town to the University of British Columbia. Pam continued her modeling work. Linus wanted to mess around with sparks, gases and liquids, and he did this at the University of Toronto.

Hamilton and I were the only ones without goals.”. (p. 58)

After high-school they all followed different paths, as expected, but as the story unfolds, Wendy finds herself working too much, Pam is discarded from her model agency because she is no longer young enough for modeling, Richard is always aloof, alienated and drunk, Hamilton is lost on drugs, and Linus is deeply bored with work. They do not seem to have the psychological conditions to avoid the dangers inherent to adult life. These negative characteristics produce a general anxiety. Such feeling is never sublimated into something positive, as finding the desired center, purpose or meaning. But it seems that they all “take refuge in some kind of resigned apathy” (GIDDENS, 2002, p. 20)⁴⁰. The apathy is not only present in Richard's absence of goals, it is also reflected in the general acceptance of ‘the system’ as it is, in the feeling of dizziness one may feel in the fast-paced rhythm of social change.

The narrators make explicit that a great deal of suffering is being undergone by the characters who cannot find any meaning to cling to in order to find a purpose in life. They can not even cooperate with each other to overcome their difficulties, and because of this incapacity, their lives have become miserable.

By the same token, Jared tells the main characters they had all the chances to develop good personalities, but it simply did not happen with them or anybody else. So, he classifies humanity as ‘six billion disasters’. He says that the good economic conditions the Canadians enjoy were expected to have been used for better, more fruitful ways:

“People elsewhere – people who didn't have our Boy-in-the-Bubble lifestyle – they looked at us and our freedoms fought for by others, and these people expected us with our advantages to take mankind to the next level ... newer, smarter, innovative ways of

thinking and living and being". (p. 268)

The characters' dull lives are terrible testimonies of a waste of time and energy. Jared adds that "Instead of finding inspiration and intellectual momentum there was ... Ativan [benzodiazepine used to treat anxiety disorders]. And overwork. And Johnny Walker. And silence" (p. 268). He points out in this passage some of the main vices in this society. These are noticed only from his position as a ghost. When he was human, he was not different from others: "And it's not as if I was any better" (ibid). It becomes clear that the characters can not escape from a set of practices by themselves. It is evident that the whole context has become harmful because the characters are portrayed as in a general state of frustration. Not even this sentiment can produce a turning point, a moment of clarity. It is suggestive that Karen can realize these problems with her perspective on 1997.

The identity the characters are able to achieve within their society is totally influenced by the dominant ideology. It is rather a 'guided' construction. For reasons related to their cultural practice, clearly marked by individualism and consumerism, social and individual behavior become more and more destructive as time advances. At last, it may assume an apocalyptic status. Jared points out how the human behavior in the past decades has become dangerous to the environment as well.

"A thousand years ago this wouldn't have been the case. If human beings had suddenly vanished a thousand years ago, the planet would have healed overnight with no damage. Maybe a few lumps where the pyramids stand. One hundred years ago – or even fifty years ago – the world would have healed itself just fine in the absence of people. But not now". (p. 269)

The decay of the narrative space mirrors the characters' lives. Not only do they intoxicate themselves with drugs, they intoxicate the environment with pollution in such a large scale that nature has exhausted its healing capacity. Consumerism, as a pervading characteristic of Coupland's world in GC, is doubly harmful because at the same time it demands almost all people's energy in earning more money to afford constant buying, it increases pollution. In this perspective, the intervention of the divine becomes necessary as an attempt to save the world from an imminent annihilation.

When considering all these points that mark the story in GC, the lack of bonding

⁴⁰ GUIDDENS, 2002, p. 20 "se refugiam em uma espécie de apatia resignada"

among the characters seems to be at the origin of all other problems. This is made evident in the precarious relationship between Richard and his daughter, Mr. and Mrs. McNeil, Megan and her grandmother, to mention a few cases of couples who are total strangers to each other. Not only between couples, loneliness is a reality for all characters. Whenever a deeper dialogue is initiated it finds no response because it is considered too intrusive, invasive of people's individuality. This cultural concept creates a barrier in communication and levels it to a rather shallow exchange of practical information.

This is a world of individuals who, in loneliness cherish their privacy but are terribly affected by solitude and the impossibility of sharing. In this book, Coupland crafts a challenge to the cynicism of isolation.

3.3. Configurations of myth in current literature

In GC, a new world myth is established within the narrative of how redemption is possible for social and cultural problems that end up devastating human relations. There is the possibility of restoration by a supernatural element equated with the divine. The background myth is the biblical narrative. The parallelism with it, however, points to several distinctions that work to characterize this novel as a postmodern parody of the traditional myth. The book subverts mainstream cultural background with a different framework for interpreting it.

The concept and importance of the afterlife in the two myths discussed here are different. The biblical myth assumes the existence of two possible places for human beings in the afterlife: heaven or hell. The existence of hell in the biblical myth directs most of the focus to this terrible possibility because of its eternal quality. The time spent on earth during a lifetime and the suffering that may be connected to it are infinitely less important in comparison to the concept of eternal damnation: "And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell." (BIBLE, Mt 5:29). The possibility of being sent to hell, in this logic, far surpasses any possible earthly suffering including bizarre images like the one suggested above. At the same time, salvation is offered for those who repent from sins and have faith in Jesus' resurrection. The focus is on the vertical plan assuming infinite greater importance. It is not that life on earth is discarded, there are hundreds of practical pieces of advice related to finding joy in society,

through relationships: “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you” (id, Mt 5:44), marriage “let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself” (id, Eph 5:33), and so forth. Nevertheless, the focus is always on reaching heaven in afterlife.

No human character in GC has any real knowledge of the afterlife, if it exists or what it is about. It is interesting to notice that the same Wendy that assumes everyone eventually goes to heaven on page 34, as a teenager, talks to Jared during the world coma and cluelessly asks him about the afterlife: “What’s it like to be dead, Jared? I don’t mean to be blunt, but I’m frightened and I’m also a doctor. In school and later at the hospital I looked at every corpse and I wondered the same thing: *Dead – what next?*” (p. 223), but the ghost does not answer her completely because he is not allowed to: “Death isn’t death, Wendy -blackness forever – if that is what you mean. But it’s not my place to say anything more to you beyond that. It’s a big deal. I have to be quiet.” (ibid).

Upon observing society in 1997, Karen says that there is only ‘the system’ in people’s lives. Capitalism has become the ‘secular religion’ of most inhabitants of GC. Just like in any master narrative, capitalism has its ideological concepts that shape people’s identities. In his story, Coupland chooses to highlight some negative issues that haunt the characters’ lives and show how destructive they may be at the personal and inter-personal level. By doing so, the author paints a picture of a dystopian society which, by definition, is bound to have a disastrous future unless a turning point may be established.

In the narrative, help comes from an unknown source, an alien place with a different reality. The whole community can be benefited with the empowerment the characters get from the divine entity, and the may be the trigger to the necessary turning point, as the forerunners of a healthier environment of bonding.

The author uses the divine element in GC as a representation strategy. Instead of directly using an institution of current culture, such as the school system, politics or family, he uses a symbolic element that is open to interpretations. This heterogeneity of meanings that his narrative achieves is richer than an authoritative fixation or nomination of a single recognizable entity in western society. The magic realist style is, in this sense, adequate for this effect in representation. It facilitates the postmodernist crave for plurality in the ambiguity of its symbols.

In GC there is the description of a dystopian society. Though, its final message is that the quality of life for humanity may improve if people are willing to work hard. The many discourses and practices that may turn humans into machines are denounced and their effects are shown in the lives of the characters. The narrative does not convey the

idea that if certain rules are followed a certain target will be achieved. It makes clear that whatever direction society may take depends entirely on the success of its own efforts. These qualities help make this narrative a postmodernist myth by considering the countless cultural configurations present in societies and how these are related by diverse ideological interests in democracies.

In addition, all Jared's messages concern the improvement of human life. This is what matters because the earth is the only place for suffering. In the story, life in the XX century has become as difficult as math can be, according to Jared:

Try to remember that funny feeling inside your head when you had math problems too difficult to solve: the faint buzzing noise in your ears... ..This is the opposite sensation of clarity. Yet for many people of my era, as they aged, this sensation became the dominant sensation of their lives. It was as though day-to-day twentieth-century living had become an unsolvable algebraic equation. This is why Richard drank, This is why my old friends used to spend their lives blitzed on every thing from cough syrup to crystal meth. Anything to make that slobby buzz make a retreat." (p. 249, 250).

Jared's friends, and by extension everyone else in the story, become so confused with the labyrinth life has turned into in late XX century. Life's meaninglessness and individualism cause tremendous suffering. This human entropy, caused by "six billion disasters" (p. 268), as Jared puts it, is what compels the divine entity to act in order to start a healing attempt. There is hope for humanity, according to Jared when he says "Destiny is what we work toward. The future doesn't exist yet. Fate is for losers." (p. 8). There is a firm belief that reality is constructed by people and its configuration depends entirely on them.

3.4. Parodies

There are some specific events of the novel's intertextuality in terms of the biblical narrative. Their likeness is only apparent for, as parodies, they disrupt original meaning and institute other significations grounded on current cultural practices. The structure of the traditional myth serves as a basis from which the story and the reader may derive common knowledge, but the familiarity is broken by the new ethos established.

The world coma is analogous to the great flood described in the Bible, Ge 7. In both cases only a small group of people resists a global catastrophe that has annihilated

mankind. In Genesis, Noah's family is chosen to survive because of their faith and righteousness among a decadent society. The divine annihilates all peoples because their hedonistic lifestyle has perverted them and they do not worship anymore. They have become slaves of sin, and sin is defined as disobedience to religious precepts. After the flood, humanity multiplies from the genes of this single good family, but the plan does not work well since people become as sinful as before. In GC the group of friends is chosen randomly. They are not better than anybody in any way and represent the very decay of society. The issue is not disobedience but consumerism and individualism. They have become slaves of these two negative features of capitalism, their inescapable master narrative. The God in GC wants to show them that life can be better enjoyed on earth, and to teach them how to overcome their and other people's apathy. After one year of world coma they still do not understand the purpose of it and Jared explains their mission. They are taken back in time to before the catastrophe and reinserted in exactly the same context as before. Their task is more complicated than Noah's family's because they have to fight against the established ethos of the 'six billion disasters'.

Jared and Wendy's sex scene also plays with another central biblical event. Since Wendy is a human being and Jared a ghost, there is the union of the divine and the human plans when they have sex and the result is Wendy's pregnancy. In the Bible, a virgin called Mary is "found with child of the Holy Ghost" (BIBLE, Mat. 1:18). This is how Jesus is introduced in the horizontal plan to save humanity from hell. In GC, apparently there is no other purpose in Jared and Wendy's union besides pleasure when the child is conceived: "Oh, fucking A, man, this is great... ..Wendy giggles and her voice drains. 'Oh, Wendy – I don't get to do this all too often these days. Oh!" (p. 225). Wendy does not even know such a pregnancy is possible. In the end of the story, while Wendy is still pregnant, Jared indicates that this divine baby is going to have an important role: "You may not be able to change the world on your own, but our kid *will* – as will Jane. You'll be their teachers and then they'll teach *you*" (p. 274). There seems to be a special purpose for these children. They may be part of GC-god's plan already previewing the characters' and humanity's immense difficulties in fighting against mainstream ideological values.

Megan's daughter, Jane, is not divine but she becomes gifted as the quotation above indicates. She is endowed with the divine through the gift of great wisdom. She is going to be a genius according to Jared. This event parallels Solomon's gift of wisdom from God: "And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the sea shore." (BIBLE, 1Ki 4:29). Given this comparison, and the accomplishments Solomon achieved with divine wisdom, there is

great expectation for what Jane may be able to do for humanity given she is the recipient of divine wisdom.

In GC, a two-edged approach to culture coexists. There is a postmodernist playing with the bourgeois work ethics (capitalism); and a postcolonial creation of NWM. The postmodernist characteristic of this novel offers “challenges to Christian liberal humanism, including the Whig interpretation of history, which holds that humankind is gradually progressing toward an ideal” (VAULTIER, 1998, p. 25), and at the same time this approach matches the “postcolonial questioning of the hegemony of Eurocentric world views.” (ibid). The recreation of myth, using the framework of what has been established in order to construct different meanings and new identities, as exposed in examples of parodies above, is sided with the discredit of the sense of an aim to be achieved, displayed in master narratives. Concerning specifically the Canadian literature produced in the second half of the XX century,

“the tensions involved in applying the terms ‘postmodern’ and ‘postcolonial’ to English...
...are echoed in the novels themselves. There, a self-conscious postcolonial urge *to* myth coexists with a postmodern play *with* myth, and that ‘congenital art form’ in Canada, the search for national identity... ...forms an ironic backdrop to it all.” (ibid)

There is the double movement of a) building a nation through myth making, one that is cognizant of the zeitgeist in Canada nowadays and wants to influence the process of identity construction by discussing important themes that concern current culture, and b) the self-consciousness of the influences it has from liberal humanism and history. In this way, the parodies of biblical passages seem to function as a means of decolonization for they provide views of the selected themes that are independent from European cultural tradition.

3.5. Pedagogy of questioning

In the story, God devises and explains his plan to cope with the problems of humanity through his messenger Jared. He does not establish any old or new master narrative to guide mankind.

The different kinds of coma are devices for perspective-giving upon cultural

practices. Karen undergoes the seventeen-year-long coma, which is effective in showing her some negative practices when she wakes up in 1997. The main characters (including Karen) move through the one-year world coma having consciousness of it and are taught by Jared about what needs to be done to cope with the drama in people's lives. The third device is 'making questions' and it is meant for the whole world population. This is a process of revising every single cultural practice with a critical mind. Questioning is meant to make people gain perspective on whatever it is that they are used to do and consider it as something that may be changed if necessary because all patterns are actually man-made.

In GC, a NWM is provided for the postmodernist questioning of established concepts. In this novel there is a cosmogony of how a questioning practice came to be in the last decade of the XX century as a way out of the traps of individualism, a problem that related to late capitalist systems. I take the metaphor of the divine element as a resource in representation that roughly mirrors scientific theories developed in the XX century on issues related to identity and ideology. The author uses the figure of a god that seeks to raise the awareness of people about the nature of economic systems, behavior patterns, social institutions, etc., saying that they are all created in culture and for this same reason they can and should be altered when necessary. I also take the world coma experience of the characters as representing the knowledge some people acquire when they study how language is used to construct ideology and identity in power relations.

In the end of the book Jared makes several incursions in the world in coma. His presence is aimed at transforming the characters' mind about their passive behavior so far. The instrument for this turning point is his speech. He engages in an enthusiastic dialogue with the characters that is powerful enough to convince them of assuming their challenging mission of fighting any thought system that may be degrading to any group of people: "Ask whatever challenges dead and thoughtless beliefs" (p. 273). It is through language that he must make the characters realize how bad the situation of humanity is: "Didn't you feel as if all of the symbols and ideas fed to you since birth had become worn out like old shoes? Didn't you ache for change but you didn't know how [to] achieve it?" (p. 271). This frustrating sensation seems to be widespread among people, and, as Wendy confesses to Jared, she also feels lonely on page 224. He answers:

"Just imagine, Wendy,' I say, 'a world without loneliness. Every trial would become bearable, wouldn't it?'[my highlight].

She thinks this over. She's smart and she sees the truth. 'Yes.' She snuffles. 'You're right.

You win the Brownie badge. But why do we have to *get* lonely? It's so awful." (ibid)

As a ghost, Jared testifies to the characters what their society lacks until they are convinced of the gravity of the problems. The bizarre experience the characters face during the world coma is meant to prepare them for their mission when the world resumes. Loneliness, in this period, strikes them harder than ever before. It seems to be necessary in order to teach them the lesson they need so they can face up the challenges they are going to endure.

When the characters seem to have understood humanity's and their own entropic condition, Jared explains the pedagogy of questioning:

"Every day for the rest of your lives, all of your living moments are to be spent making others aware of this need – the need to probe and drill and examine and locate the words that take us to beyond ourselves.

'Scrape, Feel. Dig. Believe. Ask.

'Ask questions, no, *screech* questions out loud – while kneeling in front of the electric doors at Safeway, demanding other citizens ask questions along with you – while chewing up old textbooks and spitting the words onto downtown sidewalks – outside the Plant Hollywood, outside the stock exchange, and outside the Gap.

'Grind questions onto the glass on photocopiers. Scrape challenges onto old auto parts and throw them off of bridges so that future people digging in the mud will question the world, too. Carve eyeballs into tire treads and onto shoe leathers so that your every trail speaks of thinking and questioning and awareness. Design molecules that crystallize into question marks. Make bar codes print out fables, not prices. You can't even throw away a piece of litter unless it has a question stamped on it – a demand for people to reach a finer place." (p. 272)

But Wendy wants to know what is supposed to be asked, and Jared says:

"Ask: When did we become human beings and stop being whatever it was we were before this? Ask: What was the specific change that made us human? Ask: Why do people not particularly care about their ancestors more than three generations back? Ask: Why are we unable to think of any real future beyond, say, a hundred years from now? Ask: How can we begin to think of the future as something enormous before us that also includes us? Ask: Having become human, what is it that we are now creating that will transform us into whatever it is that we are slated to next become?" (p. 273)

The passages above show the essence of Plan B. It consists of a thorough questioning of every cultural practice people exercise. Not questioning means taking social

rules for granted and, consequently, being submissive to the cultural system. The divine entity wants to promote self-consciousness. The attack is against 'dead and thoughtless beliefs' that have imprisoned, enslaved people within practices that are not challenged because of values assigned to dominant patterns of thinking. The characters in GC are taught that any cultural behavior that exists in their society is a construction that ought to be altered if it is not healthy somehow. What Jared is doing is to support a practice that is powerful enough to change whatever needs changing.

In this sense, the pedagogy of questioning developed in the narrative matches, to some extent, part of the intent of the postmodern project of "The challenge of certainty, the formulation of questions" (HUTCHEON, 1991, p. 73). In this line, Jared says that "There aren't enough words for 'transformation.' You'll invent more." (p. 273). He is trying to show the characters that the new logic should be of the dynamic change, provisory state of things, the everlasting rethinking of procedures. The questioning suggested by Jared is supposed to light self-conscience and more personal attitudes about social issues.

Questioning does not mean destroying, though. The awareness of the cultural construction of the structures that organize society does not imply their annihilation. In GC, it is recognized the "human necessity for establishing order" (HUTCHEON, 1987, p. 65)⁴¹ because the aim is the improvement of social practices. Even a possible radical change in the 'system' does not mean the absence of another system. Since the divine does not leave any indication of an ideal system, its configuration is entirely the people's task. They need to work this out together and questioning is the right tool.

The story is designed to expose a social state marked by selfish subjects living apart from each other and not being able to bond. So, the pedagogy of questioning implied in the book has its merits because a question is an invitation for a dialogue exchange. Since their relationships are being spoiled by individualism, asking proper questions may engage people to discuss important social and personal themes and reconstruct bonding.

The characters' task is not supposed to be simple. Jared already warns them that they will "be mistaken for crazies" (p. 273). The characters' mission of questioning any cultural practice is likely to face strong resistance within the ideological formations people live by because, as discussed in the first chapter, the subject takes the concepts, notions or ideas shared in these ideological regions as authentic representations of self-evident truths. In this process, the subject internalizes parts of the interdiscourse unaware of the materiality of meaning, the historic inscription language has, and the dominant intent of

⁴¹ HUTCHEON, 1987, p. 65 "a necessidade humana de estabelecer a ordem"

master narratives. Capitalism is the master narrative the characters have to deal with. The questioning they are supposed to engage in now has got to challenge capitalist concepts that are, as can be seen, part of people's identity.

Before being convinced of the effectiveness of Plan B and thinking such plan is simply unfeasible, Hamilton protests:

"We'll go crazy!

'No. You'll become clearer and clearer.'

'No – we'll go totally effing crazy.'

'Haven't you always known that, Hamilton? At the base of all of your cynicism across the years, haven't you always known that one day it was going to boil down into hard work? Haven't you?'" (p. 273)

Hamilton objects to Plan B because he knows that people in their society usually have many motives to resist the questioning of patterns, since many of them have greatly benefited from the *status quo* and are, therefore, willing to defend the current state of capitalism at any price. The ones in any kind of privileged position might see this questioning practice as a threat to self-interests. The extreme individualism portrayed in the novel dwarfs communication and bonding at the personal level, so if we take questioning as a possibility to revert this, the proponents of this movement are likely to face retaliation. In the final part of the story, though, the characters are endowed with worthy conditions for pursuing their mission. During most of the story the characters do not have the necessary qualifications to help humanity out of individualism. In this sense, they match the definition of the conflicting hero of the contemporary novel: "undecided and complex, not adapted to the environment, who does not know what s/he wants or where to go" (D'ONOFRIO, 1995, p. 91)⁴². For the protagonist of fiction to carry out his/her performance, s/he needs to acquire competence. Three modalities, suggested by D'onofrio (1995), are necessary for this: A) *to want* – the protagonist must be willing to move beyond any difficulty to reach his/her goal; B) *to know* – s/he must understand what needs to be done; and C) *to be able* – s/he must have the proper means to achieve the goal. It is not until the last pages of the novel that the characters can fulfill all requirements. Jared shows the characters what and how they are supposed to act. Had it not been through Jared's intervention, the characters would not even reach modality A, which is the most basic of the three. They were not motivated to change the society where they lived,

⁴² D'ONOFRIO, 1995, p. 91 "indeciso e complexo, inadaptado ao meio, que não sabe o que quer nem para onde ir"

or if some of them demonstrated a wish for it, it was not strong enough to move them to action. In trying to raise their awareness Jared says “You say your lives weren’t in crisis, but you know deep down they were. I was up here hearing you.” (p. 268), and “The only thing that can keep the planet running smoothly now is human free will forged into effort.” (p. 269). With these sentences, Jared starts convincing the characters of the necessity to change people’s lives. Since this is all new to them, they do not want it immediately, but want to learn how such task can be done. Modality B is the questioning practice. When Jared tells them that they should ask questions to fight ‘thoughtless beliefs’ the characters can understand how to change people. The last modality, to be able, cannot be tested because the plot ends before there is any application of Plan B. However, the characters can count on powerful tools that can enable them for their task. The following features show that the characters have some elements with which they can fight: the experience of the world coma in which they can spend a whole year away from society is likely to give them some perspective on their ideology formation; Wendy’s divine baby and the new genius of earth, Megan’s daughter, Jane, are promising supports because of their presumed capacities; and Karen in coma again serves as a reminder of their mission.

Jared says “There is no other meaning” (p. 274) besides Plan B. So, the questioning attitude is the main principle for their society. Consequently, all concepts, theories, or cultural practices are socially created, and can be, thus, questioned. It is god’s direct order to question without limits. Jared explains the importance of this pedagogy:

“In your old lives you had nothing to live for. Now you do. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Go clear the land for a new culture... ...If you’re not spending every waking moment of your life radically rethinking the nature of the world – if you’re not plotting every moment boiling the carcass of the old order – then you’re wasting your day.” (p. 274)

This pedagogy is based on a knowledge or conscience that cultural values have an origin in culture itself. It is also the urge to work towards perfecting cultural practices along with everyone as they can develop self-conscience of life’s possibilities and “radically rethinking the nature of the world” (p. 274).

Literature exerts, to some extent, an important role on cultural practices when it provides new interpretations for reality. GC offers the readers a myth for humanity to have the chance to start anew, to reconsider its ethos through questioning.

4. CONCLUSION

The structural organization of the elements that form GC has a postmodernist imprint which is evident in the close reading presented in this dissertation. The pedagogy of questioning constitutes a practice that may offer a gain of perspective for people in regards to how ideology formations work through language. These are not specifically discriminated in the novel, but it is possible to identify them as master narratives within culture which the characters, and, by extension, everybody else in this fictional world, have taken for granted. When Jared-narrator allows a glimpse into Richard's mind, in the last paragraph of the novel, he says "We'll be begging passersby to see the need to question and question and question and never stop questioning until the world stops spinning. We'll be adults who smash the tired, exhausted system." (p. 284). It is clear that the characters

are finally convinced that the system in which they live has been enslaving people by eluding them into silent obedience. During the story a great deal has to be done to open their eyes to this fact. Even after so much effort is taken with the comas and all the other supernatural demonstrations, they are very resistant to their new mission of questioning the system, and it is only after Jared's passionate explanation and dialogue that they are finally convinced. In this sense, the novel demonstrates that most people do not realize that "meaning does not exist in itself but it is determined by ideological positions put to play in the socio-historic process in which the words are produced" (ORLANDI, 1999, p. 42)⁴³, and because of this, questioning does not occur effectively as an engine for changing oppressive practices.

The society described in GC is trapped in its own ideology. In the characters' discourse they can only engage in paraphrasing processes which "represent a return to the same saying spaces. Different formulations of the same established saying are produced" (ORLANDI, 1999, p. 36)⁴⁴ [highlights are mine], only reproducing the general behavior: overworking, drug or alcohol addiction, severe dieting, for instance. It is an environment in which people do not know that "language is subjected to error and ideology is a ritual with failures" (id., p. 37)⁴⁵. So, it is in this scenario that the formulation of questions may be the way for raising suspicion on the pretense transparency of meaning. In fact, questioning is what postmodernist theory does to "centralized, totalized, hierarchic and closed systems: questions them, but does not destroy them" (HUTCHEON, 1987, p. 65)⁴⁶. Postmodernist works seek to unveil what goes unseen in society but this does not mean the destruction of the structures that support it.

A democratic capitalist regime is part of the story's setting, which mirrors what can be found in several contemporary societies in the western world. However, the connection of this novel with some historic-cultural features of the late XX century, that is, the novel's inscription in mainstream ideology is not intended to paraphrase its concepts. On the contrary, it artistically portrays a suffering society. I take the plot of this novel as the sounding of an alarm in the western world denouncing some social issues to be tackled currently. The positive notion of 'individual freedom' which is only possible in a democratic environment becomes 'individualism', and 'hard work', and the positivist notion of progress

⁴³ ORLANDI, 1999, p. 42 "o sentido não existe em si mas é determinado pelas posições ideológicas colocadas em jogo no processo sócio-histórico em que as palavras são produzidas"

⁴⁴ ORLANDI, 1999, p. 36 "representa assim o retorno aos mesmos espaços do dizer. Produzem-se diferentes formulações do mesmo dizer sedimentado"

⁴⁵ ORLANDI, 1999, p. 37 "a língua é sujeita ao equívoco e a ideologia é um ritual com falhas"

⁴⁶ HUTCHEON, 1987, p. 65 "centralizados, totalizados, hierarquizados e fechados: questiona, mas não destrói"

and achievement through work in capitalism becomes 'overworking', as a vicious practice that consumes human vitality. With these dislocations, the novel unveils basic elements of liberal humanism⁴⁷ and explores them critically. In doing so, Coupland does not try to institute a different regime or system. By not suggesting another possible project for humanity in the book, the author acknowledges his affiliation to capitalism, in which he is historically situated. But, he seeks to reveal its flaws by putting it in the magnifying glass of his fiction.

When the pedagogy of questioning becomes clear, the characters are taken by an enthusiasm upon imagining the revolution it may bring on cultural practices,

“You’ll soon be seeing us walking down your street, our backs held proud, our eyes dilated with truth and power. We might look like you, but you should know better. We’ll draw our line in the sand and force the world to cross our line. Every cell in our body explodes with the truth. (p. 284)

The truth Richard refers to is the understanding that culture must be questioned in order to be improved, and that no practices should be taken for granted. A similar perspective the comas offered the characters on ideological formations is now to be provided by the pedagogy of questioning. What the characters believe is that if they can make the people in their society engage in critically thinking cultural practices, there may be some improvement of many issues.

The use of supernatural events in the narrative may show that the characters “live in an absurd world, smashed by the bureaucracy of social institutions, by laws that can not be fulfilled, by the incommunicability among people” (D’ONOFRIO, 1995, p. 162)⁴⁸. It is evident that the supernatural is a stylistic metaphor the writer uses to artistically represent a condition of the physical world. In magic realism there are different possible interpretations for textual elements because they constitute metaphors related to culture. In the narrative a postmodernist pedagogy is implied for the improvement of life within its universe, but it is implied also that this is not an easy process, that the achievements depend entirely on how much people are willing to fight for them, and that there is not a final stage to reach but it is an ever ongoing process of revising what is established. It is in

⁴⁷ ‘Liberal Humanism’ is defined with a series of inter-related concepts by Linda Hutcheon: “autonomy, transcendence, certainty, authority, unity, totalization, system, universalization, center, continuity, teleology, closure, hierarchy, homogeneity, exclusivity, origin” (HUTCHEON, 1987, p. 84).

⁴⁸ D’ONOFRIO, 1995, p. 162 “vivemos num mundo absurdo, esmagados pela burocracia das instituições sociais, pelas leis que não podem ser cumpridas, pela incomunicabilidade entre as pessoas”

this sense that Coupland creates a new world myth of how the postmodernist questioning of master narratives came to be.

The postcolonial pluriethnic context of Canada explains the desire to shape culture by creating new cosmogonies in literature. In GC it is possible to see this effort being performed with a notion of flexibility on tradition when meaning is opened by questioning.

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