

Abstract

The thesis called *Academic Spectacle: Commodification of Knowledge in Pnin, The Breast, and White Noise* deals with the commodifying influence of the consumer society on education, knowledge and the perception of information, as it is reflected in the following American academic novels: *Pnin* (1957) by Vladimir Nabokov, Philip Roth's *The Breast* (1972) and *White Noise* (1985) by Don DeLillo.

The thesis combines the approach of literary analysis with the use of cultural-theoretical terms and theories relating to the state of postmodern society from the texts of Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard, Guy Debord, Linda Hutcheon or Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer. In addition, it elaborates on sociological concepts, such as "the risk society" of Ulrich Beck, the "public arenas model" of approaching social problems of Stephen Hilgratner and Charles Bosk or "the hyperconsumer society", the term Gilles Lipovetsky applies to the state of present societies.

Therefore, the thesis belongs to the area of cultural studies, which typically combine the approaches of sociology and literary studies. For the sake of analyzing the influence of the consumer society on the academic environment (as it is reflected in the given novels), we established four basic aspects of commodification: reification, banalization, spectacularization and fragmentation. We did so based on the texts of the above-mentioned authors.

Besides other things, this thesis aims to underline the critical potential of postmodern literary texts. They tend to foreground their metafictional nature: by calling attention to their own fictitiousness they critically present the issues they deal with. Our main concern was how the given academic novels portray the influence of consumer society on the academic environment. It was discovered that they do so not only on their thematic and motivic levels, but also by means of the narrative strategies the respective authors employ, which particularly foregrounds the novels' fictitiousness. In the narrative structure of *Pnin* reification is the chief element, the narrative structure of *The Breast* is based on fragmentation, while the narrative mechanisms of *White Noise* create the effect of banalization.

What represents an important dimension of the thesis is the emphasis on and the summary of the development of the U. S. consumer society in the second half of the 20th century, as it can be observed in the given academic novels: the development from the consumption based on *need* phase, to the consumption based on *desire* phase and to the phase of the development of consumer society in which consumption is based on an individual's

wish. Our analysis of the novels suggests that the more advanced a stage of consumer society, the less autonomy is available both to an individual and the academic environment.

First and foremost, what follows from our thesis is the fact that the influence of the consumer society on education, knowledge and the perception of information makes them more superficial and emptied out: education, knowledge and information are robbed of their significance and become (in the sense of Jean Baudrillard) their own *simulacra*. Our answer to the question of why more or less recent academic novels express considerable disillusionment from the academe lies exactly in that. However, it needs to be stated that the core of the above-sketched influence of the consumer society does not consist merely in paying tuition fees or in money being the sole motivational factor for the academics. What appears to be much more consequential is the penetration of the consumer behavior and the tendencies such as reification, banalization, spectacularization or fragmentation into the academe.

Notwithstanding their portrayal of the detrimental influence of the consumer society on the academic environment and the perception of information, the thesis stresses the fact that except for *White Noise* the works it deals with do acknowledge the possibility of acquiring valuable knowledge and information. *Pnin* finds it in the ideal of freedom and in the value of an individual human life. *The Breast* even concedes to its existence in the academic environment: it presents education as the solution to one's problems and a source of hope. Lastly, all three books demonstrate the fact that there is no place for religion – which is also a kind of knowledge – in the discourse of postmodern consumer society.