

Opponent's Report

Bc. Johana Labanczová, "Academic Spectacle: Commodification of Knowledge in *Pnin*, *The Breast*, and *White Noise*" (MA Thesis)

Johana Labanczová's project is marked by true intellectual curiosity and courage, with which she presents a comparative reading of three important works of postmodern fiction on the backdrop of a complex web of references to seminal works of contemporary critical theory, sociology, and cultural studies. The aims and methods are clearly stated, and the theoretical sources are judiciously used in most cases, with the candidate not hesitating to voice her criticism whenever this is appropriate (see particularly the critique of Fredric Jameson's views of the politics of postmodernism on pp. 8-9). The comparative reading of the three novels is particularly exciting in that it allows the candidate to discuss the development of the reflections of commodification in U.S. society and culture over three decades (the 1950s, 1970s, and 1980s respectively), with a special focus on the universities and their role in the dissemination of knowledge.

In the introductory chapter, reification, banalization, spectacularization, and fragmentation are well identified as being inextricably linked with commodification; however, referring to them as "aspects" of commodification is not particularly fortuitous (especially as reification is described as the first step leading to commodification). More importantly, the discussion of spectacularization and fragmentation in this section is all too brief, given the complexity of the topic, so much so that the section on fragmentation lacks coherence. Nonetheless, the individual terms are used in a plausible manner in all subsequent chapters of the work, perhaps with the occasional overuse of the concept of commodification (cf. "Jack is commodified into and experimental rat" – p. 44).

Overall, Ms Labanczová's thesis offers numerous original insights not only as regards the novels under discussion, but also concerning the shape of institutions of higher learning in the contemporary era. Chapter 5 – "Commodification under Scrutiny" – is a true highlight in this sense. On the other hand, parts of the argument are marred by an apparent lack of explication, especially wherever the candidate is trying to summarize matters of some complexity within a brief paragraph that is to serve as a mere example. See for instance p. 28, where the relation between psychology, group, and the selected quotation is left unexplained and collapses the point that is being made.

A passage that requires further elucidation concerns the natural sciences and the role of experts (pp. 23-24). While this may be merely a matter of style, it seems that the candidate implies that Lyotard claims that the validity of *any* scientific statement is dependent on how many experts say that it is true – which would have Lyotard indicate that once experts ceased to speak e.g. of Newton's law of gravity, it would stop being true. Moreover, the passage is directly followed by a discussion of the role of experts in judging Kepesh's transformation (in Philip Roth's *The Breast*) that, in my view, fails to take into account that what

is being debated by the experts is a patently absurd phenomenon (unlike the toxic cloud in DeLillo's *White Noise*).

As regards the well-founded conclusion of the thesis, in which the candidate asserts that the three novels show the methodological liberation of universities in postmodernity as leading towards the commodification of what is taught: does the candidate perceive this essentially as a satirical critique presented by the respective authors, or merely a bleak statement of what they perceived as reality (see the initial dismissal of Jameson on this matter)?

Finally, would the candidate be happy with the claim that none of the three novels is, strictly speaking, a work of metafiction, as these are texts reflexive of postmodern reality rather than self-reflexive texts?

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade it as “excellent” or “very good”, based on the result of the defence.

Prague, 28 August 2012

doc. Ondřej Pilný, PhD