

UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE - FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

Academic Spectacle: Commodification of Knowledge in Pnin, The Breast, and

White Noise

Spektákl na univerzitní půdě: vědění jako konzumní produkt v románech Pnin,

The Breast a White Noise

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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Praha, srpen 2012

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Anglistika-amerikanistika

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Děkuji vedoucí diplomové práce, PhDr. Haně Ulmanové, PhD, M.A., za laskavé a podnětné vedení.

Souhlasím se zapůjčením diplomové práce ke studijním účelům.

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1. Academe in Crisis: Knowledge, Capital and Postmodern Condition

American postmodern academic novels tend to present the academic institution as well as the knowledge one may acquire there in a skeptical way. Why is it so? What makes the authors feel the need to underline their destabilization? First of all, the answer must be searched for in the socioeconomic development of the U.S. in the second half of the twentieth century and its impact on the academe as well as the changing status of knowledge in present day societies. Secondly, the novels' critical stance stems from the nature of postmodern literature: its deconstructiveness and self-reflexivity, its 'incredulity towards metanarratives,'¹ which includes also the conception of universities as noble institutions with a sacred mission of transmitting valuable knowledge.

Some critics would attribute the nature of postmodern academic novels to the "decline and fall," of which Elaine Showalter speaks when discussing the situation of English departments, and which, according to her, does not occur "because business, science and technology have so much power, but because the departments have lost their sense of purpose and do not have the will to find a new intellectual center."² Nonetheless, as this thesis wants to prove, it is precisely the commodifying influence of business on knowledge and education as well as the increasing importance of science and technology which lies behind the "lost sense of purpose" Showalter speaks about.

The present thesis will focus on how the commodification of knowledge and its relation to the status of knowledge in contemporary societies is presented in three postmodern academic novels: *Pnin* (1957) by Vladimir Nabokov, *The Breast* (1972) by Philip Roth and *White Noise* (1985) by Don DeLillo. Each of the novels originated in a different decade and socio-cultural context; thus, it will be attempted to trace some development in presenting the above-mentioned issue from one novel to another.

What appears to be hard to avoid when discussing the topic is the dichotomy between humanities and natural sciences. Using the tool of Wittgenstein's "language games," Lyotard distinguishes between "narrative" and "scientific" knowledge. According to him, "what is meant by the term knowledge" in the context of humanities, "is not only a set of denotative statements, far from it. It also includes notions of 'know-how', 'knowing how to live',

¹ Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Benington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) xxiv.

² Elaine Showalter, *Faculty Towers – The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 150-1.

‘knowing how to listen’, (...), etc.’”³ Contrastingly, “Scientific knowledge requires that one language game, denotation, be retained and all others excluded.” Because of their exclusion, “The relation between knowledge and society (...) becomes one of mutual exteriority,”⁴ for “language games are the minimum relation required for society to exist (...)” as Lyotard puts it.

Speaking of the commodification of knowledge, the relation of business and scientific knowledge seems to be much less problematic than its relation to the narrative one. The knowledge humanities produce and reproduce is not immediately transferable to the sphere of industrial production, which makes them, paradoxically, much more vulnerable to commodification processes like reification, banalization, spectacularization and fragmentation (to be dealt with in the section 1. 2). It is because these processes directly interfere with our conceptions of “knowing-how”, “knowing how to live” or “knowing how to listen” – the knowledge of human cells, for instance, is left seemingly intact by them.

Nonetheless, in order to have a consequential value the results of natural sciences often need to fight for space within the public discourse manipulated by various kinds of political and economic power. According to the sociologist Ulrich Beck the chief characteristic of the present society is the ubiquity of risks: various side effects of the process of its ongoing modernization. Beck states that while one’s income or level of education are assets an individual may consume and directly experience, the existence and distribution of risks is communicated essentially through argumentation. Many of them are beyond our cognitive powers (radiation or chemicals); thus, we need experts to identify them⁵ and “public arenas” – including the media, institutions, schools, and the like – to present them as risks and provide them with corresponding public attention.

To understand the status of knowledge in present society it is helpful to rely on a particular model the sociologists of social problems use. Hilgartner and Bosk point out that “there is a huge ‘population’ of social problems,” but most of them “remain outside or on the extreme edge of public consciousness.”⁶ Through mutual interaction social problems “compete both to enter and to remain on the public agenda.”⁷ What follows from that is that social problems become social problems, risks become risks and (expert) knowledge gains value if it remains on the public agenda for a considerable time.

³ Lyotard 18.

⁴ Lyotard 25.

⁵ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2005) 54.

⁶ Stephen Hilgartner and Charles L. Bosk, “The Rise and Fall of Social Problems: A Public Arenas Model,” *American Journal of Sociology* 94. 1 (Jul, 1998): 57.

In terms of its social impact, the value of knowledge seems to be dependent on what the public conceives of it. We must ask what the public opinion is based on, though. Hilgartner and Bosk name several criteria of social problems' success in public arenas: a dramatic way of presentation, their novelty, their relation to the political affiliation and cultural roots of the given arena, or the carrying capacity of the given arena.⁸ Being aware of those, one may easily manipulate the success of particular social problems (that is also risks or information in general) in the arenas of public discourse.

The above-mentioned demonstrates the inherent relation of knowledge to power. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer trace it to the very core of Western civilization – they perceive it in abstraction: “The distance from subject to object, the presupposition of abstraction, is founded on the distance from things which the ruler attains by means of the ruled.”⁹ Lyotard does not go so far but, in the same vein as Adorno and Horkheimer, he suggests that “knowledge and power are simply two sides of the same question: who decides what knowledge is, and who what needs to be decided?”¹⁰

1. 1 The Political Dimension of Postmodern Literature

While Lyotard focuses on the status and importance of knowledge when discussing present day societies, Fredric Jameson in his *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* sees postmodern societies first and foremost as undergoing the late stage of (global) capitalism. He compares postmodernism with the preceding period of cultural development and states that “modernism was still minimally and tendentially the critique of the commodity and the effort to make it transcend itself. Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process.”¹¹ Stating that, Jameson disregards all examples of postmodern art attempting to be critical about the present state of society and culture.

He comes with the concept of postmodern parody he calls “pastiche”: “like parody,” it is supposed to be “the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, the speech in a dead language.” However, “it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, (...) amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic

⁷ Hilgartner and Bosk 58.

⁸ Hilgartner and Bosk 71-2.

⁹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) 9.

¹⁰ Lyotard 8-9.

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) x.

normality still exists.”¹² Jameson’s definition is contradictory, though. The conviction that “healthy linguistic normality” exists is not a necessary condition for the existence of parody – what suffices is having an idea of what it should be like.

Jameson discusses the politically critical dimension of postmodern art, but sees it only as a potentiality he calls “cognitive mapping.” “a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new and heightened sense of its place in the system.” Thus, the concept of “cognitive mapping” concedes some political potential to postmodern culture, although not with much optimism about its significance. Nevertheless, Jameson considers “cognitive mapping” a matter of uncertain future development: “The political form of postmodernism, if there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and the projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as a spatial scale.”¹³

Who successfully challenged Jameson was Linda Hutcheon; she does not deny that postmodern culture “is characterized by the results of late capitalist dissolution of bourgeois hegemony and the development of mass culture,” but she argues that “the increasing homogenization of mass culture is one of the totalizing forces that postmodernism exists to challenge.”¹⁴ She sees postmodernism as “fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political.”¹⁵

Firstly, it is political exactly because of being contradictory: a phenomenon that “uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concept it challenges.”¹⁶ To “use”, “abuse”, “install”, “subvert” and “challenge” presupposes a stance on the basis of which one does so, and it involves one’s critical engagement. Secondly, it is political exactly because of being historical: postmodernism rethinks and reinvents history, which must necessarily be done from a certain political point of view.

As for postmodern literature, Hutcheon demonstrates her views chiefly on the genre of historical metafiction, but they apply also to metafiction in general. She points out that such postmodern novels “can actually use the invasive culture industry to challenge its own commodification from within.”¹⁷ It is so because, as Patricia Waugh states, metafiction could be described as “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention

¹² Jameson 17.

¹³ Jameson 54.

¹⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1995) 6.

¹⁵ Hutcheon 4.

¹⁶ Hutcheon 3.

¹⁷ Hutcheon 21.

to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality”¹⁸ – to challenge reality by depicting it in a particular way.

The novels this thesis is going to deal with could be labeled as works of metafiction: having professors as their main characters and portraying the academic environment in general, they both directly and indirectly comment on the status of knowledge in today’s society, and challenge the commodification of knowledge from its primary environment. They do so not only on the literal (thematic, motivic) level, but also on the stylistic and narrative ones; these will be dealt with in the chapter called “Commodified Discourse” and the one called “Commodifying Narrative.”

1. 2 Methodology: Aspects of Commodification

It was attempted to distinguish four basic aspects and effects of commodification: reification, banalization, spectacularization and fragmentation. In doing so several relevant texts were relied on. Firstly, it was Walter Benjamin’s “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), in which the effect of industrialized commodity production on a sphere previously unrelated to it was consistently described for the first time. Secondly, it was the essay “Simulacra and Simulations” (1981) by Jean Baudrillard, focusing on the status of reality in postmodern societies, which is also the subject of Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) and Baudrillard’s *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (1970). The last two texts connect the notion of the heavy mediation of present day reality with an emphasis on the increasing spread of consumption.

The above-mentioned commodification processes will be discerned in various aspects of academic life captured in the postmodern academic novels this thesis intends to deal with. In the course of discussing the themes relating to the commodification processes the novels’ chronological sequence will be maintained, and thereby also the development of commodification of knowledge in the academic and (to some extent) social discourse will be traced.

1. 2. 1 Reification

As Adorno and Horkheimer put it, in most abstract terms reification represents the prime danger to independent thinking: “Intellect’s true concern is the negation of reification. It must perish when it is solidified into a cultural asset and handed down for consumption

¹⁸ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1988) 2.

purposes.”¹⁹ Thus Adorno and Horkheimer articulate the connection between the processes of reification and commodification – one may consider reification the first step to commodification. In addition, they underline the main danger that is involved in both phenomena, as regards the relation of knowledge and consumption.

It is chiefly the reification of particular literary characters that is going to be dealt with. In this context Benjamin’s notion of “aura” and its implication for our understanding of the figure of celebrity needs to be mentioned. A celebrity-to-be is typically captured by the film, media or fashion industry (in a movie or a photograph), and thus turns into a thing, an object. When such an object is sold, it becomes a commodity. What Benjamin calls “aura” could be defined as a unique existence in time and space; an actor deprived of it through taking part in a mechanically multiplied movie is instead given “an artificial build-up of the personality”, “the phony spell of a commodity.”²⁰ It will be shown that not even academics are immune to the spell, not to mention their being prone to create their own “artificial personalities” themselves.

1. 2. 2 Banalization

According to Guy Debord and his *Society of the Spectacle* banalization governs the society of today: a society focused on the growth of its gross national product, inducing the production as well as personal consumption of more and more goods. As Debord puts it, “Each new product is ceremoniously acclaimed as a unique creation offering a dramatic shortcut to the promised land of total consummation.” Nonetheless, “the objects that promise uniqueness can be offered up for mass consumption only if they have been mass produced.” Their prestigiousness stems from the fact that they have been “placed at the center of social life and hailed as a revelation of the unfathomable purposes of production.” However, “the object that was prestigious in the spectacle becomes mundane [that is banal] as soon as it is taken home by its consumer – that is by all its other consumers.”²¹

As for the decline of the value of consumer goods enhanced by their multiplicity, Baudrillard notes that in spite of the proliferation of goods there is no sense of abundance in consumer society: “Where, in primitive exchange, every relationship adds to the social wealth,

¹⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer xvii.

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Clive Cazeaux (London: Routledge, 2000) 330.

²¹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, 1983) 34.

in our ‘differential’ societies every social relationship adds to individual lack, since everything possessed is relativized in relation to others.”²²

In the novels to be discussed banalization takes on varied forms. Let us recall the load of psychological tests young Victor is forced to undergo in *Pnin*.²³ Its very number underlines their ultimate absurdity and uselessness. What functions similarly in *The Breast* is the hysterical rapidity with which Daniel Kepesh searches for more and more explanations of his condition – mainly of the psychological kind. In the face of the great enigma of his having turned into a breast psychology seems to be capable of producing mere banalities. Last but not least, in *White Noise* the consumption of consumer products is a key topic and the novel is stuffed with all kinds of things devalued by their own multiplicity, which seem to be filling “The emptiness, the sense of cosmic darkness.”²⁴

1. 2. 3 Spectacularization

In the social environment of post-industrialized society shaped by the mass overproduction of consumer goods and the continually spreading influence of the media, Baudrillard distinguishes the process of *simulation*; according to him, the relation between reality and media “is no longer a question of imitation nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself (...).”²⁵

Guy Debord develops such notions into the concept of “the spectacle society” where human experience is continually mediated by Baudrillard’s “hyperreal:” “the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere”²⁶ – or, in simpler terms, the world constituted by the images of reality we are exposed to through television and other media. What relates to our topic is Debord’s assertion that another characteristic of the spectacle society is the perception of social life as a matter of appearance, while the individual is given the role of a passive consumer of such appearance.²⁷ As for the present thesis, it will deal above all with the spectacularization of personality and information.

²² Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: Sage, 1998) 67.

²³ Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin* (London: Penguin Books, 1997) 75.

²⁴ Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1986) 100.

²⁵ Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations,” *Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001) 167.

²⁶ Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations“ 170.

1. 2. 4 Fragmentation

In the postmodern discourse a considerable fragmentation of reality can be observed – Lyotard, for instance, speaks of the “atomization of the social”²⁸ – and a number of critics connect it with the advancement of the consumer society. Zygmunt Bauman notices that current “avid, never-ending search for new and improved examples and recipes for life is also a variety of shopping (...),”²⁹ and requires that one be focused first and foremost on oneself. In *White Noise* this trend is ironized by that fact that almost everybody we encounter in the book is a teacher or a student; for example, the wife of the main protagonist teaches adults how they can improve their posture and she is going to have another course on eating and drinking.

What also needs to be touched upon is the fragmentizing role of advertising, a key tool of commodification. Advertising spots promoting goods contribute to the fragmentation of one’s perception, but that is not all. They work to make one differentiate oneself, to become “unique”, by means of the products one buys. However, as Baudrillard argues, “to differentiate oneself [in such a way] is (...) to affiliate oneself to a model, to label oneself in reference to an abstract model (...), and therefore to relinquish any real difference, any singularity (...).”³⁰

The examples of fragmentation that appear in the novels this thesis deals with will be more coherently discussed later, but let us mention a few of them: the high specialization of academic disciplines, which is more or less pronounced in each of the novels, dysfunctional or incomplete families and relationships, or the protagonist-fragment from Roth’s *The Breast*.

²⁷ Debord 9.

²⁸ Lyotard 17.

²⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000) 74.

³⁰ Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* 88.

2. Commodified Discourse

The following chapter is dedicated to the fabric of the fictional worlds of *Pnin*, *The Breast* and *White Noise*: it will be demonstrated that many of its aspects form a part of what Martin Buber calls the world as experience and object, belonging “to the primary word *I-It*”¹ – the world of appearances and surfaces ready for the power of money and the spectacle to take hold of it (or already taken hold of by them). In the next chapter the narrative strategies giving rise to the commodified discourses of these fictional worlds will be discussed.

2. 1. Spectacular Professors

Michael Wood notices that the beginning of *Pnin* ‘suggest[s] not the leisurely opening of a nineteenth-century novel but the continuation of an anecdote – or the start of another anecdote about a person we already know.’² One could hardly think of a literary form that would feature less one-dimensional, caricaturesque and objectified characters than anecdote. Without question, the narrator presents Pnin, as a “lovable comic object:”³

Ideally bald, sun-tanned and clean shaven, he began rather impressively with that great brown dome of his, tortoise-shell glasses (masking an infantile absence of eyebrows), apish upper lip, thick neck, and strong-man torso in a tightish tweed coat, but ended, somewhat disappointingly, in a pair of spindly legs (now flannelled and crossed) and frail-looking, almost feminine feet.⁴

The problem is that Professor Pnin is not a mere anecdote character – he is “far more of a person than the narrator bargains for.”⁵ At times he is almost uncomfortably human, and in spite of his ridiculous facade carefully built up by the narrator, the reader cannot deny Pnin his or her sympathy; for example, when his once-to-be wife leaves his apartment after demanding money for her (not Pnin’s) son: “‘I haf nofing,’ wailed Pnin between loud, damp sniffs, ‘I haf nofing left, nofing, nofing!’”⁶ What leads the narrator to patronize Pnin frequently, and what is the purpose of the narrative structure he thus gives rise to, will be discussed in the third chapter.

¹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (London: Continuum, 2004) 13.

² Michael Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts* (Chatto and Windus: London, 1994) 159.

³ Wood 160.

⁴ Nabokov 7.

⁵ Wood 160.

⁶ Nabokov 51.

Other characters (mostly college staff) adopt the narrator's strategy of objectifying Pnin – that is, using him for their own purposes. They mimic his behavior and tell each other stories about his daily struggle with America. They use him as a joke, that is, a way of how to increase their own social capital. They are interested only in his diverting surface, such as his speech; they have no interest in him as a person. They turn Pnin into one of the people they tend to see on their TV screens, one of the “spectacular presentations of living human beings.”⁷ In the following passage Dr Hagen wants to illustrate the irreversible nature of technological development, but also ease his conscience – because of his leaving the Waindell College Pnin will have to stop teaching there too:

“Who wants his personality? Nobody! They will reject Timofey's wonderful personality without a quaver. The world wants a machine, not a Timofey.”

“One could have Timofey televised,” said Clements.

“Oh, I would love that,” said Joan, beaming at her host, and Betty nodded vigorously. Pnin bowed deeply to them with an ‘I-am-disarmed’ spreading of both hands.⁸

“I am a breast,”⁹ says David Kepesh, expressing thus the whole of Roth's novella in a nutshell. He is a breast. He is an *object*. Or is he not? Why to believe a narrator who claims that he has been turned into a breast? He does not believe himself either; his mind cannot but defy the (alleged?) material reality of his body: “I realized that the whole thing was impossible. A man cannot turn into a breast other than in his own imagination.” Given the fact that he feels as a six foot square mass of tissue and others tell him he *is* a breast, similar reasoning is hardly satisfactory – Kepesh is made to find another explanation: “When I came around, I at last realized that I had gone mad. I was not dreaming. I was crazy.”¹⁰ As Kai Mikkonen puts it, Kepesh's change involves a “need to redefine his concept of reality and of the self in that reality.”¹¹ However, every such attempt of grasping the nature of his condition is destined to fail.

Among the things that might have triggered his change Kepesh mentions his memory of the vacation he spent with his girlfriend Claire, during which he confessed to breast envy. That, again, does not explain his transformation, but it calls our attention to Kepesh's psyche, his treatment of women and his obsession with their external aspects. The logic of Judaism

⁷ Debord 29.

⁸ Nabokov 135.

⁹ Philip Roth, “The Breast,” *Novels 1967-1972* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States) 2005.

¹⁰ Roth 625-626.

would explain his turning into a breast by referring to God's punishment of Kepesh's selfish and superficial behavior. Kepesh tells us he used to complain that Claire "had no taste, for instance, for intercourse per anum, and was even squeamish about receiving my sperm into her mouth. (...) I was not, you see, getting all I wanted, out of life."¹²

Nevertheless, there is no such fixed point as God in *The Breast*, no such thing as an unambiguous moral message. As Deborah Shostak maintains, Kepesh's "materiality exposes the slippage in our categories for understanding human experience"¹³ – especially those of more every-day and unquestioned nature than God, such as subjectivity and objectivity. Shostak also states that after his declaration "I am a breast" (...), Kepesh repeatedly must skirt the implications of his grammatical equation – that the 'I', the sign of subjectivity, has become an object, a thing defined by its materiality, a dismembered body part that inevitably indicates its own lack."¹⁴

The object professor Kepesh turns into has multiple connotations. In its very essence, objectification connects with spectacularization and commodification: the breast "has a tradition as the object of looking, burdened with the complex of meanings associated with the feminine as a maternal and sexual being,"¹⁵ as well as with male power, appropriation, pornography.

What needs to be mentioned is that Kepesh's state represents no end to the objectification he might be subject to. He himself is aware that if he asked Claire to fulfil his ultimate bodily wish – to have sex with his nipple – he "would have become craving flesh and nothing more;"¹⁶ that is, the ultimate object. Elsewhere he seeks to strengthen his object-like status by what Shostak calls "a fantasy of escape," based on his manic conviction that he is televised. Kepesh constructs a fantasy in which he could, just like The Beatles did, tour the country with "a kind of one-breast freakshow,"¹⁷ exposing thus himself to everyone as a weird object.

Kepesh's fantasy belongs to the consumerist mindset. As Gilles Lipovetsky asserts, later stages of consumer society are characterized by the spread of "fun morality"; what this kind of morality values most is immediate personal pleasure and escapist dreams about

¹¹ Kai Mikkonen, "The Metamorphosed Parodical Body in Philip Roth's *The Breast*," *Critique* 41. 1 (Fall 1999): 15.

¹² Roth 616.

¹³ Deborah Shostak, "Return to the Brest: The Body, the Masculine Subject and Philip Roth," *Twentieth Century Literature* 45. 3 (Autumn 1999): 329. Shostak is a feminist critic, but her views on *The Breast* mentioned here are considered unmarked by her critical position and relevant to the text.

¹⁴ Shostak 319.

¹⁵ Shostak 323.

¹⁶ Roth 621.

¹⁷ Shostak 322.

entertainment.¹⁸ One may consider Kepesh's condition a good excuse for any such fantasy – but only if we read the novella on its literal level. One could also read his story as that of a professor reduced by his treatment of women and self-conception to a less distinguished form of existence, who foolishly seeks an escape from his condition by indulging in a fantasy of becoming a celebrity, one of the “specialists of apparent life.”¹⁹ On the other hand, the reader is again and again reminded of Kepesh's material reality, which means that any attempt to interpret his state symbolically is subject to the above-mentioned *slippage*. Ontological tensions in *The Breast* will be further discussed in the third chapter.

Jack Gladney, the main character of DeLillo's *White Noise* and the founder of the Hitler studies department at a certain College-on-the-Hill, masters the art of creating his own “artificial build-up of the personality,” which is practically equivalent, in Benjamin's terms, to “the phony spell of a commodity.”²⁰ Gladney says that when he suggested to the chancellor “that we might build a whole department around Hitler's life and work, he was quick to see the possibilities,”²¹ meaning the financial ones. The chancellor also advised Gladney to gain weight in order to have a more stately appearance; Gladney added dark glasses and a new name: he turned his name into the powerful initials “J. A. K.” Adding the dark clerical robes the heads of individual departments wear at the college, all that is sure to make quite an *appearance*.

Gladney's stress on his own appearance corresponds to the emptiness of his existence as a scholar. For instance, he is unable to learn German, which is something to be expected of someone who is a “Hitler scholar.” Let us also recall the lecture Gladney gives together with his colleague Murray, in the course of which they solemnly juxtapose various data of Hitler's and Elvis's lives. The lecture does not add anything to the knowledge of students listening to the professors, but it says a lot to the reader of *White Noise*. Murray and Gladney evidently consider *both* Hitler and Elvis simply as consequential cultural figures and nothing else. While doing so they conjure up a spectacle not unlike that of Hitler's speeches and public appearances: there was “some magnetic wave of excitation, some frenzy in the air” during the lecture, and Gladney was aware of his “professional aura of power, madness and death.”²²

Gladney does not seem to be very knowledgeable in any respect, he mostly feels. When explaining to his step-daughter why he gave his son a German name, he says:

¹⁸ Gilles, Lipovetsky, *Paradoxní štěstí: esej o hyperkonzumní společnosti*, trans. Martin Pokorný (Praha: Prostor, 2007) 114.

¹⁹ Debord 29.

²⁰ Benjamin 330.

²¹ DeLillo 4.

²² DeLillo 72.

There's something about German names, the German language, German things. I don't know what it is exactly. It's just there. In the middle of it all is Hitler, of course.

"He was on again last night."

"He is always on. We couldn't have television without him."²³

Quite extraordinarily, Gladney does not consider Hitler within the limits of good and evil. In reality, he does not consider him at all; as it is shown above, he rather consumes him. He lets himself be charmed by Hitler's personality and does not even attempt a critical analysis of him – he merely expresses vague feelings. He says that it was his "custom on Fridays, after an evening in front of the TV set, to read deeply in Hitler well into the night."²⁴ Gladney speaks about it as if it was the Bible or Homer's *Odyssey* what he was "reading deeply in."

In short, for Gladney to *appear* as a scholar is enough. Baudrillard states that "'Affluence' is, in effect, merely the *accumulation of the signs of happiness*,"²⁵ and just as the consumer accumulates newer and newer signs of happiness, Gladney accumulates the signs of his "learnedness," above all of which Hitler is towering. By means of the fact that Gladney considers Hitler solely a sign of power (both in general and his own) as well as "Germaness", DeLillo illustrates how immoral consumer mentality can be within the academic environment.

2. 1. 2 Infantilized Professors

The central characters of the novels we are dealing with all teach at colleges; however, they neither appear to be nor are recognized by anyone as great authorities as regards knowledge and information. Who seems to know their way around the information the contemporary world constantly provides one better than the above-mentioned professors are either children or various kinds of experts. Presently, we will focus on the former and their infantilizing influence on the professors.

Both in *Pnin* and in *White Noise*, when the professors are juxtaposed to children, they are revealed as the ones less capable to use their knowledge to a satisfactory end, because they seem to be more entangled in the clockwork of mainstream society and subscribe more enthusiastically to the consumer mentality.

²³ DeLillo 63.

²⁴ DeLillo 16.

²⁵ Baudrillard 31.

Pnin is confronted with the son of his once-to-be wife, named Victor. Victor is a subversive child: his parents' psychoanalytic tests cease to work when applied on him and, as regards his greatest talent and hobby, he is completely without interest in fashion or latest trends: "What did it matter to him that gentle chiaroscuro, offspring of veiled values and translucent undertones, had long since died behind the prison bars of abstract art, in the poorhouse of hideous primitivism?"²⁶

Being a Russian immigrant, Pnin cannot help being amazed by what the everyday reality of America has to offer; let us recall especially his euphoria about the brand new set of false teeth: "It was a revelation, it was a sunrise, it was a mouthful of efficient, alabastrine, humane America."²⁷ Pnin's perception of America is of course greatly influenced by his being a foreigner with a great deal of unpleasant experience and a desire to blend in. The teeth in his mouth (or the house he wants to buy) do not represent a sign of affluence to him, but a sign of America, of belonging – that it proves equally illusory and transient is another question.

Published in 1957, *Pnin* reflects the very first manifestations of postwar consumerism. Commenting on Eisenhower's strategy of supporting economic growth, Baudrillard quotes an issue of *Time* magazine capturing the nature of these manifestations: "With nine million dollars of tax cuts (...) consumers went to two million retail stores in search of prosperity (...). They secured the boom of 1954 by purchasing five million miniaturized television sets, a million and a half electric carving knives etc."²⁸

What we witness in *Pnin* is a transgression between the consumption based on need and the consumption which "has become linked with desires, through the use of signs and symbols in selling products to the majority of consumers."²⁹ The position of both Pnin and the 1950s America is ambiguous: the former compensates for his previous material lack and at the same time is subject to his current desires, whereas the latter seeks to overcome the postwar recession; its effort to do so will lead (among other things) to the stage of society at which "the commodity has succeeded in totally colonizing social life (...), [and commodification] is not only visible; we no longer see anything else."³⁰

Let us relate the above-mentioned to the discussion of Pnin and Victor. Pnin intends to welcome Victor with what he considers quality American things for young boys, but he does not succeed: the "simple football ball" he demands from a shop assistant is not as American

²⁶ Nabokov 81-2.

²⁷ Nabokov 32.

²⁸ Baudrillard 83.

²⁹ Robert Bocoock, *Consumption* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 2.

³⁰ Debord 21.

as the “egg, or for example a torpedo”³¹ he refuses. On the other hand, the bookstore assistant does not seem to know Jack London and eventually, instead of purchasing the story of Martin Eden he had planned to give Victor, Pnin is obliged to concede to *The Son of the Wolf*. Nonetheless, later on he has to endure the pain of discovering that the boy he had been so earnestly preparing for is not only taller than him, but also hates football and reads Dostoyevski.

Given his materially objectified status and severely reduced cognitive functions, David Kepesh is infantilized in a much more radical way than Pnin and Gladney. Heather Montgomery defines childhood as a “non-existent stage in the life-cycle, a time of incompetence and incompleteness (...),”³² all of which could be used to describe Kepesh’s condition. As a breast he cannot move, has to rely on others to feed him, and because he has no sight, he also has to rely on their information on what is happening to him. Roth foregrounds Kepesh’s dependence also stylistically (emphasis mine): “*They tell me that I am now an organism with the general shape of a football or a dirigible; I am said to be of spongy consistency (...).*”³³

Meanwhile, Kepesh lacks the primal confidence of an infant that nobody would try to deceive him, which gives him various paranoiac ideas of being subject to medical experiments or displayed on TV: “I could have moved an audience to tears,” claims Kepesh when practicing his recitation of Shakespeare’s Othello. “Until I realized that I had an audience. It was midnight or thereabouts, but nobody has given me a good reason yet why the TV camera should shut down at any hour of the day or night (...).”³⁴

Kai Mikkonen suggests that Kepesh’s “transformation reverses the infant’s development from the imaginary, pleasure-oriented order and its relative feeling of inseparability from its surroundings into the linguistic and social order.”³⁵ However, her assertion is a little problematic. From what Kepesh says about his girlfriend we had a chance to see that before turning into a breast he had been perhaps more “pleasure-oriented” than afterwards. Afterwards, he pays attention that he would not become “craving flesh and nothing more.”³⁶ Moreover, he does feel “inseparable” from his surroundings because he cannot move, but at the same time he feels profoundly alienated from his bodily form.

³¹ Nabokov 82.

³² Heather Montgomery, *An Introduction of Childhood: Anthropological Perspectives on Children’s Lives* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2009) 50.

³³ Roth 608.

³⁴ Roth 637.

³⁵ Mikkonen 34-5.

³⁶ Roth 621.

The main setting of *White Noise* is Jack Gladney's family which leaves a plenty of room for the reader to observe Gladney's interaction with his children. Jack's wife Babette articulates her and her husband's position as regards knowledge (they do not differ, although he is a college professor), compared to that of their children thusly: "The world is more complicated for adults than it is for children. We didn't grow up with all these shifting attitudes. One day they just started appearing."³⁷

Gladney's children are definitely more perceptive than their parents; Babette's daughter Denise is first to notice that her mother is taking some pills that make her forgetful, and turn out to be an extremely dangerous drug called dylar (more about dylar in the section on objects). When the accident which is to result in "the airborne toxic event" occurs, Gladney's son Heinrich is not satisfied, as the others are, merely with the information from the media, but gets his binoculars and climbs on the roof – applying plain logic and his own senses: "The radio says a tank car derailed. But I don't think it derailed from what I could see. I think it got rammed and something punched a hole in it. There is a lot of smoke and I don't like the looks of it." Heinrich gives an opinion that the stuff leaking out of the tank must be toxic or explosive and his father tells him "It won't come this way,"³⁸ which is natural from a parent – and untrue.

Gladney wants to console Heinrich, but also expresses his trust in the technology of post-industrial civilization that must surely be capable to do away with the by-products of its existence, such as ecological catastrophes. Moreover, as far as Jack is concerned, ecological catastrophes mostly "happen" on TV and this "knowledge" makes him extraordinarily supercilious: "Society is set up in such a way that it's the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters."³⁹ Ulrich Beck, among others, shows how fundamentally wrong such attitudes are. New, industrially produced risks endanger not only people of all classes and levels of education: "By their nature they endanger all forms of life on this planet."⁴⁰

Another kind of interactions between Gladney and his children illustrating his status as an authority as regards knowledge and information represent regular family disputes about factual matters. As Leonard Orr points out, "Jack and Babette engage in these conversations as equals or even backward learners compared with their children, and Jack, the professor, is often persuaded by the argument, or at least is too confused to speak authoritatively on any

³⁷ DeLillo 171.

³⁸ DeLillo 110.

³⁹ DeLillo 114.

⁴⁰ Beck 22.

subject.”⁴¹ The following passage is particularly illustrative of how scientific data is handled by Jack and Babette on the one hand, and their son Heinrich on the other:

“I’ve got news for you,” he said. “The brain of a white rat releases calcium ions when it’s exposed to radio-frequency waves. Does anyone at this table know what that means?”

Denise looked at her mother.

“Is this what they teach in school today?” Babette said. “What happened to civics, how a bill becomes a law? (...) The battle of Bunker Hill was really fought on Breed’s Hill. Here’s one. Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania.” (...)

“I’m trying to remember three kinds of rock,” I [Jack] said. “Igneous, sedimentary and something else.” (...)

“Anthracite and bituminous,” I said. “Isosceles and scalene.”

The mysterious words came back to me in a rush of confused schoolroom images.⁴²

Heinrich is evidently used to apply his own reasoning to the data he absorbs, whereas Jack and Babette either passively consume such knowledge or handle it as signs; signs of what proper schooling should consist of, for instance – regardless of its relative uselessness. Their infantilization, stemming from their nostalgia for the *school* knowledge as they knew it, is further strengthened by their fascination by the youngest member of the family: the toddler named Wilder. “I always feel good when I’m with Wilder,” Jack says. “He is selfish without being grasping, selfish in a totally unbounded and natural way. There’s something wonderful about the way he drops one thing, grabs for another.”⁴³ In reality, what Jack admires about Wilder is the fact that he behaves as an unproblematic consumer; in him Jack sees a legitimation of his own above-mentioned consumer inclinations, of being “objectively vulnerable and dependent, passive in a world commandeered by others, a world where the messages they swallow have originated in other peoples’ minds⁴⁴” – which is how Ariel Dorfman sums up the infantile nature of a consumer.

2. 1. 3 Professors and Experts

Who will be considered “experts”, further on, are the characters associated with natural sciences, whose alliance with business (and therefore power) is, as it was stated in the first chapter, seemingly less problematic than in the case of humanities. Ulrich Beck discusses

⁴¹ Leonard Orr, *Don DeLillo’s White Noise: a Reader’s Guide* (New York and London: Continuum, 2003) 24.

⁴² DeLillo 176.

⁴³ DeLillo 209.

⁴⁴ Ariel Dorfman, “The Infantilizing of Culture,” *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives*, ed. Donald Lazare (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988) 145-6.

experts in the connection with the risks contemporary societies cannot avoid: “In risk positions (...) features of daily life can change overnight, so to speak, in ‘Trojan horses’, which disgorge dangers and with them risk experts, arguing with each other even as they announce what one must fear and what not.”⁴⁵ Beck also points out that the “history of the growing consciousness and social recognition of risks coincides with the history of the demystification of [natural] sciences.”⁴⁶

It will be fruitful to relate Beck’s views both to *The Breast* and *White Noise*, while there are hardly any characters of “experts” in *Pnin*, which could be explained by the fact that their proliferation represents a phenomenon associated with the growing awareness of man-induced risks in the second half of the twentieth century, marked by the rapidity of technological development as well as a number of particularly disastrous ecological catastrophes. The characters of psychiatrists from *Pnin* might be discussed in this context, but they are not “experts” in the above-mentioned sense of the word, and will therefore be dealt with in the section on the overspecialization and commodification of particular academic disciplines.

When discussing the distinctions between narrative and scientific knowledge, Lyotard says that within the framework of the latter “The truth of the statement and the competence of its sender are (...) subject to the collective approval of a group of persons who are competent on an equal basis. Equals are needed and must be created.”⁴⁷ What Lyotard says is in fact what the demystification of sciences mentioned by Beck lies in: the validity of a scientific statement does not depend on how “true” it is, but on how many “equals” say it is true. Nonetheless, as it was shown in the first chapter, Hilgartner and Bosk demonstrate that it depends also on how much the public is familiar with the particular statement, how much space it is given in the media, and the like.

The condition of David Kepesh is illustrative of the above-sketched nature of scientific knowledge and the dependence of the contemporary man on its representatives. As Kai Mikkonen points out, “*The Breast* is not a story about the process of metamorphosis but about explanations and protestations about being metamorphosed,”⁴⁸ while explanations and protestations represent the professional field of experts.

Kepesh is fundamentally “unequal” to the medical professionals who provide him with the descriptions of his condition – he cannot even see. Such descriptions, nevertheless, make

⁴⁵ Beck 53-4.

⁴⁶ Beck 59.

⁴⁷ Lyotard 24.

⁴⁸ Mikkonen 15-16.

no real sense to the afflicted professor: “I am a breast. A phenomenon that has been variously described to me as ‘a massive hormonal influx’, and ‘endocrionopathic catastrophe’, and/or ‘hermaphroditic explosion of chromosomes’ (...).”⁴⁹ Equally meaningless to Kepesh is the expert judgement of his psychoanalyst Dr. Klinger who tells him that, psychically, he is perfectly fit: “I tell him I want to go mad, he tells me that it’s impossible: beyond me, *beneath* me. It took this for me to find that I am a citadel of sanity.”⁵⁰

In *White Noise* one may find characters whose role resembles the one of the “experts” Beck speaks of most. Indeed, one of the key messages of the novel is that the “harmful, threatening, inimical lies in wait elsewhere, but whether it is inimical or friendly is beyond one’s own power of judgement, is reserved for the assumptions, methods and controversies of external knowledge producers,”⁵¹ such as the technicians who come to deal with “the airborne toxic event” or Jack’s doctors. A doctor tells him: “‘I don’t think I like your potassium very much at all,’ (...) ‘Look here. A bracketed number with computerized stars.’ ‘What does that mean?’ ‘There is no point your knowing at this stage.’”⁵²

From the above-mentioned it seems that modern science, medicine included, is so out of a non-specialist’s reach, so “unequal” to him or her, that the only thing left for them to do is to admire the superficial “magic” of experts’ actions – to *consume* it. The significance of the image of the technicians getting rid off “the airborne toxic event” is quite the same. They were supposed to

plant microorganisms in the core of the toxic cloud. (...) These microorganisms (...) would literally consume the billowy cloud, eat it up, break it down, decompose it. (...) No one knew what would happen to the toxic waste once it was eaten or to the microorganisms once they were finished eating.⁵³

2. 2 Universities

Linda Hutcheon asks “What precisely (...) has been challenged by postmodernism? First of all, institutions have come under scrutiny: from the media to the university, from museums to theatres.”⁵⁴ The university institution comes under heavy scrutiny also in the postmodern academic novels discussed here. For the time being, we will focus more on how the academic

⁴⁹ Roth 607-8.

⁵⁰ Roth 614.

⁵¹ Beck 53-4.

⁵² DeLillo 260.

⁵³ DeLillo 160.

⁵⁴ Hutcheon 9.

environment is depicted in the novels, rather than on the processes which constitute what is happening there – although both are interconnected.

According to Francois Lyotard, “The old principle that the acquisition of knowledge is indissociable from the training (*Bildung*) of minds or even individuals, is becoming obsolete and will become ever more so.”⁵⁵ This trend can be observed also in Nabokov’s, Roth’s and DeLillo’s depiction of the university environment. The university is portrayed as a simulacrum of an institution of higher learning, which merely simulates the processes of passing over some information and knowledge acquisition.

In the novels we discuss the spectacularization of the respective academic institutions is foregrounded by the discrepancy between their provinciality and the aura they try to maintain. They are all located in small town settings and none of their names suggests anything grandiose: Pnin teaches at Waindell College, Kepesh left Stanford for the college named Stony Brook, while Gladney’s alma mater is, most ironically of all, the College-on-the-Hill.

Introducing Waindell College, Nabokov uses a dose of archaic and lofty vocabulary, to subvert the dignified impression the college would like to make: “The famous Waindell College bells were in the midst of their morning chimes. The bells were musical in the silvery sun.” The following impression of flatness is among various stylistic and motivic elements suggesting the poor capability of Waindell College to provide meaningful, deeper knowledge of the outer world: “Framed in the picture window, the little town of Waindell – white paint, black pattern of twigs – was projected, as if by a child, in primitive perspective devoid of aerial depth, into the slate-grey hills (...).”⁵⁶

Waindell College tries hard to foster its supposed solemn aura by proper decoration of its interior and exterior – such that would confirm its place in the great tradition of Western thought. Unfortunately, the decoration is unbelievably kitschy and gives exactly the opposite impression. For instance, there is an ancient professor who went blind and the narrator remarks that

It was strange to see [in the dining room], directly behind him on the wall, his stylized likeness in a mauve double-breasted suit and mahogany shoes, gazing with radiant magenta eyes at the scrolls handed him by Richard Wagner, Dostoyevski, and Confucius, a group that Oleg Komarov, of the Fine Arts Department, had painted a decade ago into Lang’s celebrated mural

⁵⁵ Lyotard 4.

⁵⁶ Nabokov 25.

of 1938, which carried all around the dining room a pageant of historical figures and Waindell faculty members.⁵⁷

A copy of an antique statue is not as outrageous at first sight, but it serves a similar purpose as the mural described above. Moreover, Nabokov uses it as a hint at the commodification of the college environment: “The 1954 Fall Term had begun. Again the marble neck of a homely Venus in the vestibule of Humanities Hall received the vermilion imprint, in applied lipstick, of a mimicked kiss.”⁵⁸

As for Kepesh’s Stony Brook, there is admittedly not much to discuss because the depiction of the college itself is almost absent from *The Breast*. Nonetheless, its absence is significant: it seems to highlight Kepesh’s impotence as a professor. He does not know even the most basic things concerning himself, but for some forty odd pages cannot stop lecturing. He is a bundle of unfulfilled and unfulfillable desires; the craving of his nipple only stresses the fact that he is completely lost and cannot teach anybody anything. As Shostak points out, “Like his desire to know, his sexual desire can never be satisfied.”⁵⁹

Yet, there is the ideal of “uncontaminated classroom” that exists solely in Kepesh’s mind and can be discussed in this context. Kepesh says that as a “passionately well meaning literature teacher I was always fond of ending the hour with something moving for the students to carry from the uncontaminated classroom out into the fallen world of junk food and pop stars and dope.”⁶⁰ The idea of the uncontaminated classroom is completely subverted not only by the fact that it is a breast who claims to be the creator and guardian of such an environment – shortly before the passage quoted above Kepesh himself betrays a desire to become rich, famous and completely fallen: “I will make hundreds of thousands of dollars – and then I will have girls, twelve – and thirteen – year old girls, three, four and five at a time, naked and giggling, and all on my nipple at once.”⁶¹ Later on, the inclination of the academic institution and its representatives to self-commodification and spectacularization is suggested by Roth: “I may even be a pop star myself and have just what it takes to bring great poetry to the people.”⁶²

College-on-the-Hill also is not described in such detail as Pnin’s Waindell College, but as a setting it has a couple of features decidedly worth commenting on. Firstly, the very beginning of the novel presents the college environment by means of the jumble of consumer

⁵⁷ Nabokov 58-9.

⁵⁸ Nabokov 115.

⁵⁹ Shostak 326.

⁶⁰ Roth 640.

⁶¹ Roth 639.

objects the students bring with themselves after the summer holiday for their next semester: “the stereo sets, radios, personal computers; small refrigerators and table ranges; the cartoons of phonograph records and cassettes; the hairdryers and styling irons; the tennis rackets (...); birth control pills and devices; the junk food still in shopping bags (...).”

Although “stationary and books”⁶³ are mentioned too, there is no denying that after the students’ return, the college is littered with more or less costly objects unrelated to its traditional primary purposes: passing over of knowledge, preserving the value of education, doing valuable research, and the like. Such a depiction of the college can be understood as an unflinching reflection of its times. As Robert Bocoock remarks, “What matters in this later form of commodity capitalism is the *disconnection* between the items purchased by consumers and ‘the real.’”⁶⁴ The abundance of students’ objects makes one ask whether what the college has to offer differs in any way from such objects’ “*promise* of satisfaction, not the ‘real thing,’ which could be actual orgasmic satisfaction.”⁶⁵

DeLillo further pursues this vein of argument by the setting he juxtaposes the college with: the supermarket where the main hero spends about as much time as he does teaching at the College-on-the-Hill. For instance, Gladney’s solemn account of his feelings of seeming fulfillment after one family visit to the supermarket, resembles (in tone and vocabulary) the speech of a man talking about an important existential, academic or at least professional achievement: “in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls – it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less (...).”⁶⁶

2. 3 Philosophy of Gesture, Freudianism, Hitler Studies

Speaking about the postmodern incredulity toward metanarratives, Lyotard states that “the obsolescence of metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, to the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it.”⁶⁷ All of the novels we deal with call attention to the crisis of academic institution also in relation to the increasing spectacularization and fragmentation of the information the institution aims to pass over to its students.

⁶² Roth 640.

⁶³ DeLillo 3.

⁶⁴ Bocoock 113.

⁶⁵ Bocoock 115.

⁶⁶ DeLillo 20.

⁶⁷ Lyotard xxiv.

In their renderings of the academic environment Nabokov, Roth and especially DeLillo, present us largely with knowledge and information resembling a mere semblance of knowledge or information. In this section we will deal mainly with various more or less peculiar academic disciplines the three authors portray in their works. By means of them they reflect the fact that “élitist culture [of which the academe is surely a part of] has indeed been fragmented into specialist disciplines,” as Linda Hutcheon points out. She adds that “hybrid novels like [the ones we discuss] (...) work both to address and to subvert that fragmentation through their pluralizing recourse to the discourses of history, sociology, theology, political science, economics, philosophy, semiotics, literature (...), and so on.”⁶⁸ In the case of *Pnin*, *The Breast* and *White Noise* it is mainly psychoanalysis, literary studies and culturology.

Apart from Pnin himself, Waindell College is peopled by other professors who themselves, both consciously and unconsciously, work to enhance the commodification and spectacularization of their fields of research. Let us recall one of these characters: “Two interesting characteristics distinguished Leonard Blorengé, Chairman of French Literature and Language, he disliked literature and he had no French. This did not prevent him from travelling tremendous distances to attend Modern Language conventions (...).”⁶⁹ In other words, Blorengé is by no means concerned with his supposed field of research but only with his own status which, nevertheless, lacks any substance. “A highly esteemed money-getter,” he manages to find a sponsor of his project called “‘French Village’, two streets and a square, to be copied from those of the ancient little burg of Vandell in the Dordogne.”⁷⁰

Another of Pnin’s colleagues is “Laurence G. Clements, a Waindell scholar, whose only popular course was the Philosophy of Gesture (...).”⁷¹ A better example of an over-specialized discipline with a superficial subject matter and a symptom of the fragmentation of the academe would be hard to invent.

What might seem striking is that psychiatry and psychology are seen quite similarly to the Philosophy of Gesture in *Pnin*. The psychological jargon is ridiculed – for example the obsession of Dr Wind and his wife Liza (once supposed to marry Pnin) with the word *group*: “Wind dreamed of a happy world consisting of Siamese centuplets, anatomically conjoined communities, whole nations built around a communicating liver. ‘It is nothing but a kind of microcosmos of communism – all that psychiatry,’ rumbled Pnin (...).”⁷²

⁶⁸ Hutcheon 20-21.

⁶⁹ Nabokov 117.

⁷⁰ Nabokov 117.

⁷¹ Nabokov 25.

⁷² Nabokov 43.

Let us recall another derogatory comment on the significance of psychology and psychological experiments from *Pnin*: Dr Wind and his wife are the parents of Victor, the gifted boy with whom Pnin is confronted. When he was little, they tried to test his abilities in various ways. For example, there was the absurd “Angst Augusta Abstract Test in which the little one (*das Kleine*) is made to express a list of terms (‘groaning’, ‘pleasure’, ‘darkness’) by means of unlifted lines.” The narrator cannot refrain from adding: “How much care, skill, inventiveness have gone to devise those marvelous techniques! What a shame that certain patients refuse to cooperate!”⁷³

Although Nabokov does not explicitly criticize psychoanalysis, his biting remarks about psychology and psychiatry can be understood as an attempt at a common-sense reaction to the American psychoanalytic craze, whose high point came between the 1940s and 1960s. As John Burnham states, at that time “it was difficult to separate the core psychoanalytic movement from the pervasive cultural impact.”⁷⁴ Less carefully and diplomatically, Ian Dowbiggin remarks that “Freudianism in twentieth century America tended to blend in with a more general ‘psychological mindedness.’”⁷⁵ In reality, it is rather that “psychological mindedness” the authors we discuss in one way or another subvert and criticize – not medical attempts to cure mental illnesses.

Dowbiggin’s work poignantly connects the boom and superficialization of psychoanalysis and related ways to enhance people’s mental health with the rise of the consumer society. He notices that the consumer society, among other influences, contributed to “an ever-widening democratization of mental health care policy and practice (...).”⁷⁶

In *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* Baudrillard states that in order to fulfil his or her social function, a modern consumer sees it as his or her duty to be “happy, loving, (...) participative, euphoric and dynamic. (...) There is no question for the consumer (...) of evading this enforced happiness and enjoyment, (...) the equivalent in the new ethics of the traditional imperative to labour and produce,”⁷⁷ for, as it was stated above, consumption is a major force in modern economy. This phenomenon opens the way for what Dowbiggin calls “the doctrine of therapism:” he claims that “Search for sanity had culminated in a widespread belief that everyone is entitled to mental health, people are sicker than they realize, and

⁷³ Nabokov 75.

⁷⁴ John C. Burnham, “Introduction,” *After Freud Left: A Century of Psychoanalysis in America*, ed. John C. Burnham (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012) 4.

⁷⁵ Ian Dowbiggin, *The Quest for Mental Health: A Tale of Science, Medicine, Scandal, Sorrow and Mass Society* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 91.

⁷⁶ Dowbiggin 6.

⁷⁷ Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* 80.

government's mandate is to empower people to enjoy a right to emotional well-being."⁷⁸ One of the possible ways of how to read the whole of Roth's *The Breast* could be to view it as a merciless subversion of such a doctrine.

For five years Kepesh had had a psychoanalyst - Dr. Klinger, whose very name is a subversive joke: "Have you ever thought what fantasies of dependence bloom in your patients merely on the basis of your name?"⁷⁹ Kepesh asks his psychoanalyst. There is also the fact that Kepesh's metamorphosis does not consist in his changing into something completely alien, such as a giant insect; he turns into a primary object of male sexual fantasies, and thus also of psychoanalysis: into "a mammary gland such as could only appear, one could have thought, in a dream or a Dali painting."⁸⁰

Kai Mikkonen sums up that "The narrative implies that Kepesh entertains ideas about impotence, bisexuality, wish-fulfillment, childhood deprivation, madness, hallucination, oversensitive imagination, escapism, unconscious obsession and dreaming."⁸¹ In other words, Roth makes Kepesh consider a whole catalogue of mental instabilities or illnesses as possible explanations for something as astonishing and absurd as being turned into a breast. Thus Roth succeeds in ridiculing the mechanical approaches of psychoanalysis and its popularized forms as well as the psychoanalysts' conviction that every problem has its remedy. As Dowbiggin remarks, "Psychoanalysis caught on in the United States, because countless Americans thought it justified their sunny optimism that all problems could be licked with the right methods, something the more pessimistic Freud clearly did not believe."⁸²

Another specialized – though long established – academic discipline Kepesh deals with in *The Breast* are literary studies. Based on Kepesh's treatment of his girlfriend and selected passages from the novella, it was suggested that one could read Kepesh's being a breast as a comment on his former identity. At one point Kepesh tells himself that he should "stop thinking about my 'dignity,' regardless of all it meant to me when I was a professor of literature, a lover, a son, a friend, a neighbor, a customer, a client and a citizen."⁸³ Let us focus on Kepesh's role of a professor of literature. As regards his professional field, he, in a sense, keeps himself in shape by listening to records with Shakespeare's plays. It is important for him that his girlfriend Claire look up the words he has forgotten and reread him the passages he has missed: "Otherwise it might begin to seem that I listen to *Hamlet* for the

⁷⁸ Dowbiggin 2.

⁷⁹ Roth 633.

⁸⁰ Roth 607.

⁸¹ Mikkonen 20.

⁸² Dowbiggin 90.

⁸³ Roth 612.

same reason that my father answers the phone at my Uncle Larry's catering establishment – to kill time.”⁸⁴ Here go Kepesh's plans for the future: “When I finish with Shakespeare, I can go right on to first-rate performances of Sophocles, Sheridan, Aristophanes, Shaw, Racine – but to what end? To what end?”⁸⁵

Without doubt, this question could have been asked also about his career of a professor of literature at the time he had still retained his normal physical shape. How much his occupation after the metamorphosis actually differs from the one before that? As a breast he cannot read, but listening is quite sufficient for thinking about and discussing works of literature; he can also (though with the help of others) do research and even lecture, as Roth's novella demonstrates.

Kepesh does not have an answer to the question of “to what end” he should do what he is doing, but that only shows he had not had it before his transformation either; only then, the lack of purpose had not seemed such an urgent problem – there had been plenty of pleasant activities Kepesh could kill his time with. For a moment he rejects the question of the purpose of his literary activities completely, which underlines his (and his field's) susceptibility to the processes of commodification: “For a breast it is the bloody *murder* of time. Pal, I am going to make a pot of money. I don't think it should be difficult, either. If the Beatles can fill Shea Stadium, why can't I?”⁸⁶

Gladney's Hitler studies, the most peculiar academic discipline to be found in all the novels this thesis deals with, has already been discussed in the section 2. 1. Some critics view them simply as an amusing piece of satire; for example, to Elaine Showalter “DeLillo's deadpan accounts of Hitler and Elvis studies sounds like a hilarious parody of academic fashion in the 80s (...).”⁸⁷ However, as it was demonstrated, they are worth a more detailed discussion – just as the academic exploits of Gladney's colleagues.

What most of the scholars from the College-on-the-Hill seem to be doing falls into the category of heavily subverted cultural anthropology or culturology. Gladney's colleague Murray particularly excels in the discipline. His soliloquies on various topics could be described as the masturbation of pop culture itself: “I tell them they can't think of a car crash in a movie as a violent act. It's a celebration. A reaffirmation of traditional values and beliefs. (...) There is a wonderful spirit of innocence and fun.”⁸⁸ Without a trace of irony or critical distance he describes TV in the following way: “It's like myth being born right there in our

⁸⁴ Roth 637.

⁸⁵ Roth 639.

⁸⁶ Roth 639.

⁸⁷ Showalter 95.

⁸⁸ DeLillo 218-219.

living room (...). The medium practically overflows with sacred formulas if we remember how to respond innocently and get past our irritation, weariness and disgust.”⁸⁹

Let us recall also one memorable debate the members of the college staff are having during lunch. Having gone through most varied pop culture topics, one of them notes that “These are the things they do not teach (...). Bowls with no seats. Pissing in sinks. The culture of public toilets (...). I’ve pissed in sinks all through the American West. (...) I pissed in a sink when it was twenty-two below. That’s the coldest I’ve ever pissed in a sink in.”⁹⁰ There is no intention of disparaging culturology or cultural anthropology – only the uncritical enthusiasm about purely material aspects of culture, which often lacks any ambition to make a conclusion about what it studies.

In a slightly different context, but very aptly in relation to ours, Adorno and Horkheimer assert that “Such metamorphoses of critique into affirmation do not leave theoretical content untouched; its truth evaporates.”⁹¹ Applied to DeLillo’s “scholarly disciplines”, the evaporating truth of theoretical content represents the resignation of the academic environment to function as an anti-mainstream cultural element, an element characterized by critical distance, fresh perspectives, or other than simply materialistic values.

2. 4 Spectacular Objects

Since this thesis dedicates itself to the phenomena of commodification and consumption, commodities as such and certain selected objects will be dealt with in the last section of this chapter. We will focus on how they influence the lives, and possibly also the thinking, of the main characters of the novels we discuss.

First and foremost, the role of television in *Pnin*, *The Breast* and *White Noise* will be dealt with. Television could be characterized as the most influential object of the latter part of the twentieth century. Its existence has been a major source of what Guy Debord calls “the society of the spectacle.” He defines the spectacle as a state when: “All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.”⁹² Brian McHale states that “TV intervenes in empirical reality not only in the context of domestic TV consumption (...); it also, and more profoundly, does so at the source, so to speak.”⁹³ The spectacle of television turns reality into commercialized representation in an unprecedented extent – let us take the sports events

⁸⁹ DeLillo 51.

⁹⁰ DeLillo 68.

⁹¹ Adorno and Horkheimer xv.

⁹² Debord 12.

⁹³ Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London Routledge, 1992) 127.

broadcast on TV channels, for instance. Without television much less people would consider them worth their attention; the same applies to various celebrities, and the like.

The only mention of television in *Pnin* has already been discussed. At the time the novel was written the influence of TV had not yet been much theoretically reflected; thus – unlike Roth and DeLillo – Nabokov had no complex theoretical concepts of pop culture to rely on. Even Theodore Adorno in his *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* published in 1951 mentions television only in the connection with other phenomena detrimental to the existence of genuine art: “No work of art, no thought has a chance of survival, unless it bear within it repudiation of false riches and high-class production, of color films and television, millionaire’s magazines and Toscanini.”⁹⁴ In the scene quoted on the page 15 of this chapter Nabokov grasps the objectifying influence of TV, but does not go any further.⁹⁵

As regards *The Breast*, the influence of television is implicit in Kepesh’s paranoia that he is being constantly exposed to the eyes of the public: “Dr. Gordon assures me that I am under no more surveillance than any other difficult case – I am not on display in a medical amphitheatre, am not being exposed to closed-circuit television... but what’s to prevent him from lying?”⁹⁶ In comparison to *Pnin*, to Roth’s novella it already fully applies that, as McHale puts it: “TV functions in postmodernism not just as one [ontological] pluralizer among others, but as the figure of ontological plurality itself.”⁹⁷ In *The Breast* the imagined television splits reality into what Kepesh experiences as directly lived by himself and what he thinks is broadcast to many curious eyes. In addition, the potential presence of television represents a figure of his potentially split identity – the ontological tension to be dealt with in the next chapter.

It is also important to note that Roth shows TV shaping human needs and desires – the reality it is merely supposed to portray. Kepesh is not just afraid of being televised; in reality, he *needs* an audience to confirm his identity. When Kepesh reflects on his own howling and sobbing, he wonders: “Was I really so racked by the proposal [to have sex with his nipple] I’d made that morning to Miss Clark? Or was the display largely for the benefit of my great audience, to convince them that, appearances aside, I am still very much a man (...)?”⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Theodore W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London and New York: Verso, 2005) 50-51.

⁹⁵ Nabokov 135.

⁹⁶ Roth 612.

⁹⁷ McHale 131.

⁹⁸ Roth 620.

DeLillo comments on the reality-forming power of television more bluntly. For instance, when the plane with Gladney's daughter Bee on board, which nearly crashed, lands, Bee, concerned for her shaken fellow-passengers, asks where is the media: "They went through all that for nothing?"⁹⁹ Similarly, after the "airborne toxic event" a person complains: "Shouldn't the streets be crawling with cameramen soundmen and reporters? Shouldn't we be yelling at them 'Leave us alone, we've been through enough (...).'"¹⁰⁰ In short, in *White Noise* people hardly seem to be capable to experience reality as directly lived by themselves (emphasis mine): "I moved quietly through the [children's] rooms on bare white feet. I looked for a blanket to adjust, a toy to remove from a child's warm grasp, feeling I'd wandered into a *TV moment*."¹⁰¹

McHale mentions *White Noise* among the post-modern novels which "emphasize TV's ubiquity and the interaction between TV programming flow and the flow of reality itself, demonstrating how TV worlds insinuate themselves into the real world to pluralize the latter."¹⁰² Let us recall for example Gladney's TV news-based explanation of why he is going to survive the "airborne toxic event:" "I'm the head of a department. I don't see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That's for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the county, where the fish hatcheries are."¹⁰³

The fact that TV functions as an ontological pluralizer which splits and influences our perception of reality is further demonstrated by several fairly eerie passages in which it seems that the television is almost having its own will: "After dinner, on my way upstairs, I heard the TV say: 'Let's sit half lotus and think about our spines.'"¹⁰⁴ At another moment, "The TV said: 'Now we will put the feelers on the butterfly.'"¹⁰⁵

Apart from the TV, other objects in *Pnin* have been commented on as well. As it was suggested, Pnin does not approach objects as a postmodern consumer. Michael Wood remarks that "Pnin's joy at his new set of false teeth (...) is both foolish and touching."¹⁰⁶ It may be so, but his joy has its explanation. The new teeth, the car, the house he almost buys all represent a sign of Americanness to him, but he values them also because of his previous experience with material lack. For Pnin's relation to selected material objects Baudrillard's assertion that

⁹⁹ DeLillo 92.

¹⁰⁰ DeLillo 162.

¹⁰¹ DeLillo 240.

¹⁰² McHale 129.

¹⁰³ DeLillo 117.

¹⁰⁴ DeLillo 18.

¹⁰⁵ DeLillo 96.

¹⁰⁶ Wood 160.

“consumption is defined as exclusive of enjoyment”¹⁰⁷ does not apply. The following description of the bowl given to Pnin by Victor perfectly illustrates Pnin’s ability to perceive the unique value of an object: it was “one of those gifts whose first impact produces in the recipient’s mind a colored image, a blazoned blur, reflecting with such emblematic force the sweet nature of the donor that the tangible attributes of the thing are dissolved (...) in this pure inner blaze (...).”¹⁰⁸

There is only one considerably significant object in *The Breast*, but the objectification of Kepesh has already been discussed. Nonetheless, this object has its mirror image in the poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo” by R. M. Rilke (inspired by a statue of Rodin) quoted at the end of the novella. What is the significance of the poem in Roth’s text?

We did not know his legendary head,
in which the eyeballs ripened. But
his torso still glows like a candelabrum
in which his gaze, only turned low,

holds and gleams. Else could not the curve
of the breast blind you, nor in the slight turn
of the loins could a smile be running
to that middle which carried procreation.

Else could this stone be standing maimed and short
under the shoulders’ translucent plunge
not flimmering like the fell of beats of prey

nor breaking out of all its contours
like a star: for there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.¹⁰⁹

According to Mikkonen, “the elevated style of a Rilke and a Rodin (...) is opposed to the ‘lowness’ of Kepesh’s body and the cheapness of his and Dr. Klinger’s pop psychology jargon.”¹¹⁰ Truly, the pop psychology jargon is presented as a cheap nonsense by Roth; however, if read as a comment on the rest of the text, the poem loses all the elevated style it

¹⁰⁷ Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* 78.

¹⁰⁸ Nabokov 128.

¹⁰⁹ Roth 641.

¹¹⁰ Mikkonen 31.

might have possessed: the “middle that carried procreation”, “contours”, “torso” or “the curve of the breast” acquire a decidedly ironic touch. The poem turns into a ridicule of the escapism of those literary scientists who base their activity on upholding the works of “high literature” as sacred *objects* and a protective shield against the supposedly “contaminated” world.

It also ridicules the readers who let themselves be blinded by “the curve of the breast” and consider the novella merely a silly joke – just as for example Fredric Jameson does. For him the poem embodies a modernist chastisement of the postmodern gibberish: “the august premonitory eye flashes of Rilke’s archaic Greek torso which warn the bourgeois subject to change his life; nothing of that sort here in the gratuitous frivolity of this final decorative overlay.”¹¹¹ Last but not least, in Rilke’s poem Roth makes fun of the modern Westerner who is convinced to be leading an absolutely free life, but, in reality, also in his or her world there are complex and sinister limitations: “for there is no place/that does not see you.”

In *White Noise* there is overabundance of commodities everywhere; for example, food is not described in terms of its taste, but rather of its marketing qualities – the appearance of its package: Gladney’s son “Wilder was still seated on the counter surrounded by open cartons, crumpled tinfoil, shiny bags of potato chips, bowls of pasty substances covered with plastic wraps, flip-flop rings and twist ties, individually wrapped slice of orange cheese.”¹¹² When Gladney searches for a bottle of dylar (the medicine his wife takes) in the dustbin, every item of garbage is also meticulously recorded and described, in order to foreground the fact that after the use of consumer objects, other objects remain – there is no end to them. Finishing his search through the dustbin, the professor of Hitler studies remarks: “I found a banana skin with a tampon inside. Was this the dark side of consumer consciousness?”¹¹³

Electrical appliances in *White Noise* do not resemble those innocent supporters of economic growth invoked by Eisenhower in 1958 and mentioned by Baudrillard in his *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. They are threatening; they embody a critique of what Ulrich Beck calls “techno-scientific curiosity.” “The first priority of techno-scientific curiosity is *utility for productivity*, and the hazards connected with it are considered only later and often not at all.”¹¹⁴ In Beck’s vein Gladney’s son Heinrich argues: “The real issue is the kind of radiation that surrounds us every day. Your radio, your TV, your microwave oven, your power lines just outside the door, your radar speed-trap on the highway. For years they told us these low doses weren’t dangerous.”¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Jameson 10.

¹¹² DeLillo 7.

¹¹³ DeLillo 259.

¹¹⁴ Beck 60.

¹¹⁵ DeLillo 174.

Electrical appliances are described as mysterious objects, the control of which we seem to be at risk to lose any time: “The refrigerator throbbed massively. I flipped a switch and somewhere beneath the sink a grinding mechanism reduced parings, rinds and animal fats to tiny drainable fragments, with a motorized surge that made me retreat two paces,”¹¹⁶ says Gladney.

Last but not least, dylar – the drug supposed to cure one’s fear of death Babette is taking – should be mentioned. It has a few side effects: “I could die,” confesses Babette to Gladney, “I could live but my brain could die. The left side of my brain could die but the right side could live.”¹¹⁷ Dylar represents people’s willingness to expose themselves to risks and comments on the mechanisms of consumer society. As Robert Bocoock states, dylar and other “consumer goods of postmodernity are sold as symbols. They form their own kind of reality.”¹¹⁸ Dylar symbolizes Babette’s incapacity to deal with the fact of death on her own, and to her it is a symbol of hope. It is also a *simulacrum* of a cure; what matters most about dylar to its consumers is indeed what it represents, not what it does or is assumed to do. Thus, it is a perfect embodiment of Baudrillard’s “resurrection of the figurative where the subject and substance have disappeared.”¹¹⁹

Just as TV, dylar forms its own kind of reality by influencing people’s perception: “The drug not only caused the user to confuse words with the things they referred to; it made him act in a somewhat stylized way.”¹²⁰ Just as TV, dylar makes people confuse or mix reality and representation as well as adopt a kind of behavior unnatural to them.

¹¹⁶ DeLillo 101.

¹¹⁷ DeLillo 193.

¹¹⁸ Bocoock 114.

¹¹⁹ Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations” 174.

¹²⁰ DeLillo 310.

3. Commodifying Narrative

In this chapter it will be suggested that the narrative strategies employed in *Pnin*, *The Breast* and *White Noise* resemble the commodification processes governing the commodified discourse. We will study the ontological tensions to be found in the respective novels' key narrative mechanisms.

From a certain point of view it is possible to consider these narrative strategies an aspect of the novels' metafictional character. Although according to Waugh "metafiction is a tendency or function inherent in *all* novels,"¹ in the works of postmodern literature it is always explicit.

3.1 Ontological Instabilities

In postmodernity "The center no longer completely holds," as Linda Hutcheon remarks. She specifies the assertion by saying that what is marginal or excentric takes on new significance – "be it in class, race, gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity."² Thus, the specification unnecessarily places her initial assertion into the context of political correctness ideology, while it may have also other implications. The center no longer completely holds, there are no universally accepted metanarratives and the only hegemonic discourse of postmodern societies is legal system.

Another discourse which is "difficult, if not impossible, to avoid in capitalist social formations"³ of postmodern times is the one of consumption. It is so because of its omnipresence complicating its reflection by an individual born into the consumer society. It is so because "Obedience to standards (...) tends to be achieved nowadays, through the enticement and seduction rather than by coercion and it appears in the disguise of the exercise of free will."⁴ Moreover, the ubiquity of consumption is in accordance with postmodern decenteredness. The consumer is not encouraged to adhere to some kind of central standards – he or she is (seemingly) invited to differ, to be original. In the words of Jean Baudrillard, the consumer's "need is never so much the need for a particular object as the 'need' for difference (...),"⁵ from the others who, nevertheless, choose from the same supply of goods.

The novels this thesis deals with reflect the above-stated relation between the postmodern decenteredness and consumer society not only in their topics, but also in their

¹ Waugh 5.

² Hutcheon 12.

³ Bocoock 110.

⁴ Bauman 86.

narrative mechanisms and structure. Generally speaking, Nabokov, Roth and DeLillo do so by creating ontological tensions or instabilities in their novels, and thereby referring to a missing center. Thus, the political potential of their works discussed in the first chapter is realized also on the narrative level. Rather than “pastiche,” the political dimension of their narrative structures nears the technique of “cognitive mapping,” which Jameson considered merely “some as yet unimaginable mode of representing.”⁶

In the second chapter the attempts of *Pnin*'s narrator to objectify the novel's central character have been discussed in some detail. They foreground the tension between his textual level and the one of Pnin – especially because Pnin's and the narrator's versions of reality often do not agree. The narrator claims to be an old friend of Pnin's, which, nevertheless, the latter denies. Towards the end of the novel the narrator describes his meeting Pnin in Paris: “He said he vaguely recalled my grand aunt but had never met me.”⁷

The narrator also claims to have played a considerable hidden role in Pnin's life. He says that in Paris he was acquainted with Pnin's almost-wife Liza. It is suggested that he might have slept with her and treated her with no courtesy: “I suggested she let me see those poems again in some quieter place. (...) I told her they struck me as being even worse than they had seemed at the first reading.” The narrator wants to make clear that he did not care for Liza, that he considered her a game piece to play with. His tone also denigrates Pnin's feelings for her: “In the result of emotions and in the course of events, the narration of which would be of no public interest whatsoever, Liza swallowed a handful of sleeping pills.”⁸ Shortly after he gives us this elaborate, matter-of-fact remark, Liza asks the narrator whether she should accept Pnin's marriage proposal (which he sent to her in a letter she shows the narrator) – a genuine, unpretentious confession: “I am not handsome, I am not interesting, I am not talented. I am not even rich. But Lise, I offer you everything I have, to the last blood corpuscle (...). And (...) this is more than any genius can offer you because a genius needs to keep so much in store (...).”⁹ The narrator did not tell Liza anything, so she accepted.

Brian Boyd calls the narrator simply Nabokov, because he has a lot in common with the author. Alluding to the recurrent image of a squirrel in *Pnin*, he states that “Nabokov knows just enough of Pnin to be able to pad out the story with more: not enough to record the story of Pnin's life, but enough to make of him a stuffed squirrel, a lifeless substitute that as a

⁵ Baudrillard 77-8.

⁶ Jameson 54.

⁷ Nabokov 150.

⁸ Nabokov 152.

⁹ Nabokov 153.

raconteur he can set out on display.”¹⁰ The problem is that the narrator is both a Russian academic celebrity coming to teach to Waindell and the narrator of *Pnin*. Thus, he can claim about Pnin anything he pleases – it is the fictional character that destabilizes the ontology of the text and tells the others “Now, don’t believe a word he says,”¹¹ or: “We are friends, but there is one thing perfectly certain: I will never work under him.”¹²

As Michael Wood states, “Pnin wishes to free himself from this man’s [narrator’s] interest and patronage; and does.” Before he actually flees from the pages of Nabokov’s novel, there is a chance to notice a visual foreshadowing of Pnin’s flight from the narrator’s grips – a flight from representation and objectification. It involves the horrible mural mentioned in the section 2. 2 and we learn about it from one of the humorous anecdotes by which the members of the faculty try to objectify Pnin after his departure: “there was the scene between Pnin and President Poore at lunch – an enraged, spluttering Pnin (...) pointing a shaking forefinger at the preliminary outlines of ghostly muzhik on the wall, and shouting that he would sue the college if his face appeared above that blouse (...)”¹³

The ending of the novel is in many ways redeeming: Pnin escapes the narrator who constantly tries to make a ridiculous “stuffed squirrel” out of him. He also escapes the cheap pretentiousness of Waindell College and its commercialized activity: “This is what I want to call Pnin’s revenge,” says Michael Wood, “an escape from pity and from comedy; a flight from the very design of the fiction, and a picture of what a human liberty might be in the unfictional world.”¹⁴

The last paragraph of *Pnin* goes as follows: “‘And now,’ he [a member of the college staff] said, ‘I am going to tell you the story of Pnin rising to address the Cremona Women’s Club and discovering he had brought the wrong lecture.’”¹⁵ At first sight, it suggests that there is no escaping representation and that although Pnin left the college, he will remain the helpless squirrel of the others’ anecdotes. In reality, it stresses the fact that no perfect representation exists. The anecdote the member of the faculty is prepared to tell seemingly brings us to the beginning of the novel and the first of Pnin’s adventures. Nonetheless, something slightly else happens to him at the novel’s beginning: he does not bring the wrong lecture with him – his problem is that he is unable to read the train timetables correctly and also leaves the (correct) lecture somewhere.

¹⁰ Boyd 286.

¹¹ Nabokov 154.

¹² Nabokov 141.

¹³ Nabokov 157.

¹⁴ Wood 163.

¹⁵ Nabokov 160.

In Nabokov's novel the tension between the levels of Pnin and the narrator is never completely resolved. As Wood points out, Pnin's "flight from the design must also (...) be among the fiction's designs," and he adds that "we can handle a little vertigo, and liberty will always look complicated and unlikely from the world of cages."¹⁶ The above-mentioned political dimension of the novel articulated through the ontological tension *Pnin* contains, consists first and foremost exactly in Pnin's struggle for liberty from the patronizing, objectifying and also commodifying narrator. The problem of the fiction's designs cannot be dismissed, but what is important is that Pnin's struggle is for ever enacted in the novel.

One should not forget another tension in *Pnin*: the narrator competes with Pnin for the reader's trust and sympathy. Thus, by distancing him into the sphere of (amusing and unfeeling) objects, the narrator strives to use Pnin as a commodity adding to his own luster. Even when he, in a seemingly unmarked way, relates his meeting Pnin later on after a conference, he cannot help picturing him merely as a curious picturesque figure: "and as we hung from adjacent straps in the crowded and spasmodic vehicle, my good friend managed to combine a vigorous ducking and twisting of the head (...) with a magnificent account of (...) Gogol's use of the Rambling Comparison."¹⁷ The fact that the narrator's motivation for objectifying Pnin is similar to that of Pnin's colleagues telling each other anecdotes about him, makes the narrator more of a fictional character, and thus deepens the tension between his and Pnin's textual levels. It also makes us recall that Pnin flees the commercialized environment of the college too. However, just as his flight from the narrator's grips, moving to another college appears to represent an uncertain liberation.

The ontological tension in *The Breast* lies above all in the discrepancy between Kepesh's transformation into an object and his unchanged thinking subjectivity. In relation to Kepesh's declaration that he is a breast Deborah Shostak notes that "To state 'I' requires a capacity for reflexiveness that we ascribe only to human beings. (...) If Kepesh can state 'I am a breast,' he cannot state 'I am a human being,' and so that 'I' becomes a very compromised and unstable marker"¹⁸ of Kepesh's subjectivity. The ontology of the text is further destabilized by the fact that Kepesh indeed does not *know* what actually happened to him – at least he cannot confirm it by sight, which he lost.

There is not only the tension between subject and object, but also between male and female in Kepesh's predicament. Thus he wonders about the male nurse whose touch does not arouse him but cools down: "the conjunction of male mouth and female nipple can hardly be

¹⁶ Wood 163.

¹⁷ Nabokov 155.

¹⁸ Shostak 320.

described as a homosexual act. But such is the power of my past and its taboos, and the power over my imagination of women (...) that I (...) receive my morning ablutions like any other invalid (...).”¹⁹ However, the sexual dichotomy leads us back to that of subject and object. As Shostak points out, “Kepesh’s sense of his feminization comes not only from his transformed material body but also from his recognition of the shift in power relations that causes him to be dominated by the subject who can look at him.”²⁰

Kepesh’s condition, and therefore also the ontological tension contained in *The Breast*, reflects the commodification of individual identity in present day societies. As Ronald L. Jackson sums up, commodification “implies a lessening of value or status. (...) In regard to people, commodification refers to a person valued chiefly for her or his economic worth or behaving or treated like a thing controlled or beholden to economic forces.”²¹ Roth’s novella also underlines the (at least partially) self-inflicted nature of the commodification of individual identity. While the cause of Kepesh’s transformation into an object remains unknown to him, to be commodified – to expose himself publicly for money as a most uncanny postmodern apostle of poetry – is his own wish. From another point of view, having been formed by living in the age of “the wholesale evacuation of reality by its mass media simulations,”²² and unable thus to reject the idea of being publicly exposed unknowingly, he may rather want to do it himself before anyone else does. By and large, his commodified exposure seems inescapable.

In DeLillo’s *White Noise* we encounter almost ubiquitous but moderate tension between reality and representation. In a shelter where the Gladneys hide after the “airborne toxic event” Babette reads to a group of elderly people: “Babette read an ad for diet sunglasses. The old people listened with interest.”²³ The reality of “diet sunglasses” is nonsensical, but their being represented by means of the popular adjective seems to make them very interesting within the sunglasses market, in spite of the fact that “diet sunglasses” are nonsense – not everybody is able to see through marketing strategies.

The tension between reality and representation in *White Noise* can be called moderate because they seem to have merged to a considerable extent and produced what Baudrillard calls “the hyperreal:” “From medium to medium,” that is, with every other representation, “the real is volatilized (...). But it is also, in a sense, reinforced through its own destruction. It

¹⁹ Roth 622.

²⁰ Shostak 325.

²¹ “The Commodification of Identity,” ed. Ronald L. Jackson, *Encyclopedia of Identity*, vol. I (London and New Delhi: Sage, 2010) 107.

²² McHale 127.

²³ DeLillo 147.

becomes *reality for its own sake* (...): no longer the object of representation, but the ecstasy of denial and of its own ritual extermination: the hyperreal.”²⁴

White Noise depicts the life within “hyperreality.” As it was discussed, TV and other media producing representations of reality are practically omnipresent in the novel. After the “airborne toxic event” the behavior of Gladney’s family is largely determined by what they hear on the radio. Before the above-stated name is established, the product of a cargo train accident is called “feathery plume” and “black billowing cloud.”²⁵ Likewise, the effects the escaped substance is supposed to have on human organism “change” from sweaty palms and skin irritation to nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath, to heart palpitations and a sense of *déjà vu*, and then to convulsions, coma and miscarriage. Jack’s and Babette’s daughters develop these symptoms as soon as the family learns about them from the radio – or shortly before that (nobody knows): “At dinner Denise kept getting up and walking in small stiff rapid strides to the toilet of the hall, a hand clapped to her mouth. (...) Heinrich told her she was showing outdated symptoms.”²⁶ Whether her sickness is a product of childish invention or psychosomatic reaction, it foregrounds the power of representation to influence and even give rise to reality.

The third possibility – that Denise and her sister Steffie would actually show real symptoms – appears to be the least probable one. Afterwards, there is nothing wrong with their health and the exact nature of Nyodene D that escaped during “the airborne toxic event” is by no means certain. Steffie saw a documentary about toxic wastes at school: “The movie wasn’t sure what it does to humans. Mainly it was rats growing urgent lumps.”²⁷

Moreover, the hyperreal nature of the “airborne toxic event” and the corresponding phenomena is underlined by the fact that, as it was already stated, *White Noise* comments on the present state of the world in which *experts* have more and more power. Thus Jack, feeling quite all right, accepts a very unsatisfactory expert representation of his physical condition telling him he has Nyodene D in his blood stream. He is told he *might* die and should try to *outlive* the substance; the doctor he sees says: “I wouldn’t worry about what I can’t see or feel.”²⁸ Jack seems to have a simulacrum of death: “You are said to be dying and yet are separate from the dying, can ponder it at your leisure, literally see on the X-ray photograph or

²⁴ Jean Baudrillard, “Symbolic Exchange and Death,” *Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001) 148.

²⁵ DeLillo 115.

²⁶ DeLillo 117.

²⁷ DeLillo 111.

²⁸ DeLillo 141.

computer screen the horrible logic of it all.”²⁹ Gladney’s “death” is a sign of death, which together with other “Signs/symbols float in hyper-reality, that is the contemporary socio-cultural system formed out of signs and symbols.”³⁰

In fact, Jack is commodified into an experimental rat, or at least he is going to serve his doctors so. As it was mentioned, his wife does the same for the manufacturers of dylar. Although they do not get money for having substances of unknown effects in their bodies, they get a transitory comforting feeling of having oneself explained by experts (Jack) or the hope that what pains us most might be cured (Babette) – feelings not unlike those of a consumer seeking satisfaction.

In *White Noise* the hyperreal is depicted as a multiplicity of various kinds of representation. It indeed appears that “whatever we experience (...) comes to us mediated through our endless consumption of electronic entertainment.”³¹ Despite the admission of people’s helplessness face to face with the status (rather than knowledge) of an expert, DeLillo’s novel contains the sense of no new possibilities; it is a symptom of the postmodern excessive supply of all kinds of goods as well as of the representations of reality produced by “electronic entertainment.” The following conversation between Gladney and his son Heinrich clearly elaborates on the conventions of the thriller genre and/or the TV news, of which they both presumably have good knowledge. Jack and Heinrich speak about the murderer convicted for life with whom Heinrich plays chess via mail.

“Did he fire from a highway overpass, a rented room? Did he walk into a bar, a washette, his former place of employment and start firing indiscriminately? People scattering, taking cover under the tables. People out on the streets thinking they heard firecrackers (...).”

“He went up to a roof.”

“A rooftop sniper. Did he write in his diary before he went up to the roof? Did he make tapes of his voice, go to the movies, read books about other mass murderers to refresh his memory?”

“Made tapes.”

“Made tapes. What did he do with them? [So they go on for another half page.]”³²

The fact that *White Noise* is a postmodern novel conscious of preceding literary representations also contributes to the sense that nothing new may happen in its setting. For

²⁹ DeLillo 142.

³⁰ Bocoock 114.

³¹ Peter Knight, “DeLillo, Postmodernism, Postmodernity,” ed. John N. Duvall, *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 30.

example, Peter Knight notices that “The concluding section of *White Noise*, when Jack sets out to kill (...) Willie Mink, is likewise an ironic reworking of the ending of *Lolita* (1955), in which Humbert Humbert is caught up in the self-awareness of all the pulp-fictional clichés (...).”³³

According to Jean Baudrillard hyperrealism does not do away with the center. In hyperrealism “the whirligig of representation goes mad, but with an implosive insanity which, far from being ex-centric, casts longing eyes at the center, toward its own repetition en abîme.”³⁴ That, however, does not mean that DeLillo’s novel is nostalgic – its unflinching representation, and therefore also subversion, of the hyperreal was hopefully in sufficient detail demonstrated above. Nonetheless, what best illustrates the twisted nature of a hyperreal society and its nostalgia for the real is Jack’s renewed sense of life when he decides to kill Willie Mink: “My airy mood returned. I was advancing in consciousness. I watched myself take each separate step. With each separate step, I became aware of processes, components, things relating to other things. Water fell to earth in drops. I saw things new.”³⁵

He does not see things new, as Knight reminds us. Even when he prepares to kill someone, he cannot avoid such action movie clichés as the evocation of water falling in slow motion. There is no wonder about it, though; death is certainly not a topic which would be escaping pop cultural representation.

³² DeLillo 44.

³³ Knight 28.

³⁴ Baudrillard, “Symbolic Exchange and Death” 149.

³⁵ DeLillo 304.

4. Knowledge – an Escape from Commodification?

Throughout the preceding pages the commodification of academic environment in *Pnin*, *The Breast* and *White Noise*, have been demonstrated on the depiction of the academics, the physical appearance of the academic institutions, on what they seek to pass over to their students as well as on the narrative structures of the given novels. However, one should also ask whether the novels this thesis deals with really offer no grain of hope as regards the existence of knowledge (both academic and non-academic) that would be relevant outside the mechanisms of consumption and represent a value alternative to the norms of consumer society.

When discussing where an opposition to consumerism might come from, Bocoock notes that “The world’s religions have provided satisfaction for the desires of the unconscious in earlier epochs, sometimes with psychologically damaging consequences, but at other times with more positive outcomes.”¹ He offers an interesting counterweight to the impact of consumer society: religion. According to Bocoock, if educated people engaged in it, and thus prevented it from falling into fundamentalism, it could function so. As he adds, “Religious discourse could, indeed still do, provide many people throughout the world with grounded reasons and motivational patterns for limiting their desires for consumer goods and experiences.”²

It is possible to think of other such counterweights: ecological awareness, for example, or the academic institution – provided it is first and foremost understood as “as a center of independent thought;” while it is considered “a center of thought, and of independent thought, it is also a center of criticism.”³ From our discussion of *Pnin*, *The Breast* and *White Noise* it seems that these characteristics could hardly be applied to the colleges portrayed in the novels; nonetheless, does it also mean that these suggest no existence of the kind of knowledge described in the first paragraph?

4. 1. Knowing Too Much or Knowing Too Little

The sense of no new possibilities commented on in relation to *White Noise* can be observed also in *Pnin*’s Waindell College. The college is portrayed as repetitive machinery propelled by routine rather than by the urge to make new discoveries and contribute to the development of thought. The beginning of the fall term is described in the following way: “And still the

¹ Bocoock 117.

² Bocoock 118-119.

College creaked on. Hard-working graduates, with pregnant wives still wrote dissertations on Dostoyevski and Simone de Beauvoir. (...) As usual, sterile instructors successfully endeavored to ‘produce’ by reviewing the books of more fertile colleagues,”⁴ and so on.

None of the professors whose work is mentioned in the novel is seen as doing anything original; Bloreng and Clements were already discussed. There is also Roy Thayer and his “overgrazed pasture,” the field of eighteenth century poetry “with the trickle of a brook and a clump of initialled trees; a barbed wire arrangement (...) separated it from Professor Stowe’s domain, the preceding century, when the lambs were whiter, the turf softer, the rill purlier,” and from the early nineteenth century of Dr Shapiro “with its glen mists, sea fogs and imported grapes.”⁵

Thus it was reiterated that the literary scholars of Waindell do little original work. In comparison to them Pnin seems to be quite capable, though he has evident problems with completing what he began: we know that “He contemplated writing a *Petit Histoire* of Russian culture, in which a choice of Russian Curiosities, Customs, Literary Anecdotes, and so forth would be presented in such a way as to reflect in miniature *la Grande Histoire*,” yet, he seems to enjoy “the blissful stage of collecting his material”⁶ much more than trying to form it into a definite shape.

However, the narrator’s description of Pnin’s work at the library makes us recall that the most valuable knowledge *Pnin* makes available to us is not of academic nature. The narrator says that it was a treat to see Pnin “pull out a catalogue drawer from the comprehensive bosom of a card cabinet and take it, like a big nut, to a secluded corner and there make a quiet mental meal of it (...).”⁷ In short, this is one of the moments when the narrator literally makes a squirrel out of Pnin, when he ridicules and objectifies him.

In Pnin’s struggle for freedom Nabokov articulates his sympathy for the individual history of a human being who may appear humorous in his current living conditions, but who feels and thinks, and whose past had not lacked drama and tragedy. As it was mentioned towards the beginning of the section 2. 1, he does so by means of the “moments when we lose all sense of ridicule, even of the gentlest kind. (...) The moments usually concern death, or memory, or a lost Russia.”⁸

³ Robert M. Hutchins, “Social and Political Conformity,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 9. 4 (May 1953): 105

⁴ Nabokov 115.

⁵ Nabokov 131.

⁶ Nabokov 63-4.

⁷ Nabokov 64.

⁸ Wood 168.

Brian Boyd draws a parallel between *Pnin* and Nabokov's lectures on Cervantes at Harvard: "He had reacted with outrage to *Don Quixote's* cruelty, to the book's implicit invitation to its readers to enjoy Don Quixote's pain and humiliation. *Pnin* is Nabokov's reply to Cervantes. It is no accident that the book's risible name (...) almost spells 'pain.'" The fact that *Pnin* "has a complex inner existence Don Quixote is never allowed, and his pain suddenly matters," represents the most valuable knowledge the novel contains. The commercialized Waindell College has nothing to do with it – it is seen as an exponent of the kind of thinking and social organization that reduces people to the position of objects.

In *The Breast* the main character does not face a routine or familiar situation at all. Confronted with his predicament, all kinds of knowledge he can think of fail. As it was already stated, the medical diagnosis telling Kepesh that for example "a massive hormonal influx"⁹ befell him, offers no plausible explanation of his condition, which would have to involve some kind of *way out*. Moreover, it really does not help him grasp his change in any way. The same applies to various psychoanalytic explanations summed up by Mikkonen¹⁰ and to Kepesh's own theory that he took one leap from Kafka and "Made the word flesh."¹¹ All in all, knowledge from the spheres of both humanities and natural sciences is helpless when confronted with Kepesh's predicament.

In spite of the above-stated, let us suggest that *The Breast* is the most optimistic text from the ones dealt with in this thesis, as regards the value of the information one might learn somewhere, the academe included. At the very end of his lecture Kepesh stops pondering an escape to the realm of the spectacle and addresses the readers: "Morons and madmen, tough guys and skeptics, friends, students, relatives, colleagues, and all you distracted strangers, with your billion different fingerprints and faces – my fellow mammalians, let us proceed with our education, one and all."¹²

The breast and *The Breast* tell us that although the world may sometimes appear extraordinarily peculiar, there is no remedy to it than ceaseless trying to understand it, and the capability not to recoil from the sources of information that might seem dubious – shocking, ludicrous or obscene – at first.

Despite the mention of the spectacularization of death in the current media underlined in *White Noise*, the fact is that death remains unknown – no matter how avid a consumer of its media representations one is. One of the basic themes of the novel is the fear of death the

⁹ Roth 607-8.

¹⁰ Quoted on the page 30.

¹¹ Roth 638.

¹² Roth 641.

central middle-aged couple (not only Babette) is haunted by. Thus goes Jack's introduction of their life: Babette

runs, she shovels snow, she caulks the tub and sink. She plays word games with Wilder and reads erotic classics aloud in bed at night. What do I do? I twirl the garbage bags and twist-tie them, swim laps in the college pool. (...) Babette talks to dogs and cats. I see colored spots out of the corner of my right eye. (...) I walk up the hill to school, noting the whitewashed stones that line the driveways of newer homes.

Who will die first?¹³

Elaine Showalter remarks that *White Noise* is "about a fear of death and the ways people stave it off with knowledge, titles, robes and ceremonies."¹⁴ What she says implies two things: first, people stave off death by (at least seemingly) grandiose, important things in *White Noise*; secondly, they use knowledge, among other things, to do so, which is the most mature thing one can do – to come to terms with death based on one's knowledge of life.

Nevertheless, what the above-quoted passage alone suggests is that Jack and Babette carve their time into a series of more or less random insignificant activities, so that it does not seem that it passes so quickly. They also do not appear to have acquired much wisdom or mental balance in the course of their lives: Babette's willingness to let herself be made a "human test animal"¹⁵ in the dylar research is a perfect example of that.

Jack and Babette convince each other that they want to die first because they could not live without the other, but, in reality, they hope it will not happen. They pass their time as they can and they shop: "The emptiness, the sense of cosmic darkness. Mastercard. Visa. American Express."¹⁶ At least to some extent, their problem, the fear of death, could be solved by knowledge, by some critical thinking and the mature acceptance of the fact of death. However, in *White Noise* DeLillo shows that this is what a modern consumer is not capable of; presumably the last thing in the world which does not bore him or her they can approach only with fear.

4. 2. Beyond the Academe

Having commented on a rather marginal status of the academe as a source of valuable knowledge in the novels we discuss, we will ask whether Nabokov, Roth and DeLillo do not

¹³ DeLillo 15.

¹⁴ Showalter 96.

¹⁵ DeLillo 193

¹⁶ DeLillo 100.

argue for the existence and value of a different, more lasting kind of knowledge – the one Bockock presents as a convenient counterweight to the consumer society: that is, religion. Let us briefly examine the traces of religious discourse in *Pnin*, *The Breast* and *White Noise*.

In this context it is possible to mention strange coincidences and patterns in Nabokov's fiction, such as the recurrence of the motive of a squirrel in *Pnin*, which all suggest a designer. Brian Boyd does not understand the "squirrel pattern" wholly as a creation of the mischievous narrator: according to him, it "seems to initiate a number of possible metaphysical answers to the problem of human pain: a patterner of human lives, a designer of fate (...); or a tender interest in particular mortal lives on the part of those who once cared for them (...)." ¹⁷

However, the above-mentioned remains only carefully suggested; as Rutledge remarks, "a systematic religion with which one would be able to capture" the essence of life is "antithetical to Nabokov's thought (...)." ¹⁸ Having agreed to that, one does not have to share Michael Wood's conviction that "The shapes [or patterns] Nabokov presents would be skeptical wishes, images of what a thoroughly designed world might look like. They would be *only* shapes, mere appearances of sense than sense itself." ¹⁹ Rather than appearances, let us call them suggestions – "appearance of sense" implies illusion, while to the importance which Nabokov ascribes to a "particular mortal life" in *Pnin* we can hardly deny genuine transcendence.

It is quite curious that, especially because of being a Jew, the protagonist of *The Breast*, does not even touch upon the possibility of God's influence, when considering the potential causes of his transformation. God would fill the "blind spot" ²⁰ Kai Mikkonen speaks about quite easily; but then, the novella would cease to portray a modern individual of postmodern times inclined to search for consolation in spectacular images and consumption, rather than religion.

Aron Appelfeld states that "Roth's works have no Talmud, no Jewish philosophy, no mysticism, no religion." ²¹ It all applies also to *The Breast*, except for the last item – despite the fact that Kepesh does not show any adherence to the Jewish religion. Not only does he lack religious faith, but also an elementary confidence in those around him: "I checked with

¹⁷ Boyd 282.

¹⁸ David S. Rutledge, *Nabokov's Permanent Mystery: The Expression of Metaphysics in His Work* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011) 181.

¹⁹ Wood 170.

²⁰ Mikkonen 15.

²¹ Aharon Appelfeld, "The Artist as a Jewish Writer," eds. Asher Z. Milbauer and Donald G. Watson, *Reading Philip Roth* (New York, St. Martin's, 1988) 14. Quoted in: Theodore Solotaroff, "Philip Roth: A Personal View," ed. Harold Bloom, *Philip Roth* (Broomal, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003) 121.

Claire to be sure she had spelled thanks with that *x* before she went ahead and mailed my little message. If she mailed it. If she even took it down.”²²

In reality, Kepesh’s predicament resembles the situation of someone asked to believe in God or a believer in doubts. He or she can rely neither on their senses nor on the way of thinking which the consumer society endorses – that is, the “universal curiosity” Jean Baudrillard speaks about: “‘Try Jesus!’ runs an American slogan. You have to try everything, for consumerist man is haunted by the fear of ‘missing’ something, some form of enjoyment or other.”²³ *Trying* has nothing to do with faith or religious belief. Kepesh tries all kinds of explanations of his condition, but he alone has no means of choosing the right one.

In comparison to the other two novels, the topic of religious belief is explicitly dealt with towards the end of *White Noise*. Jack takes the injured Mink to the hospital in Germantown run by German nurses, the last Germans who remained there. After some time Jack discovers that they only pretend to believe in God and is shocked: “The nonbelievers need the believers,” a nun tells him. “They are desperate to have someone believe. (...) It [the belief] is for others. Not for us. (...) If we did not pretend to believe these things, the world would collapse. (...) Someone must appear to believe.”²⁴ As it was mentioned before, for Jack German things represent something vaguely solid and genuine. At the same time, we know that his feeling so is not based on any analysis or a grounded opinion, but a layer of many media representations of Hitler that mingled in his mind. Thus, what is German inevitably stands for a simulacrum in *White Noise*.

That Jack is able to see Mink as a person (and not a helpless part of his action movie), and help him after they are both shot is redeeming, but he “sees new” only after bodily harm is done to him – when Mink shoots him, he has the strongest experience unmediated by any representation from the whole novel. However, he quickly relapses to imagining himself in a film: “There was something redemptive here. Dragging him foot-first across the tile (...), through the door and into the night. Something large and grand and scenic. (...) I know I felt virtuous, I felt blood-stained and stately, dragging the badly wounded man (...).”²⁵ Thus, professor Gladney’s mind seems quite inseparably tied to the mechanisms of the spectacle.

The end of *White Noise* has an unquestionable apocalyptic ring. After the “airborne toxic event” people begin to flock to a highway overpass to watch the sunsets that have become strangely beautiful: “People walk up the incline and onto the overpass, carrying fruit

²² Roth 624.

²³ Baudrillard 80.

²⁴ DeLillo 318.

²⁵ DeLillo 314.

and nuts, cool drinks, mainly the middle-aged, the elderly, some with webbed beach chairs which they set out on the sidewalk, but younger couples also, arm in arm at the rail, looking west.” The fact that Jack narrates this passage mostly from the perspective of “we” strengthens the fated melancholy of what he says: “Some people are scared by the sunsets, some determined to be elated, but most of us don’t know how to feel, are ready to go either way. (...) What else do we feel? Certainly, there is awe, (...) but we don’t know whether we are watching in wonder or dread (...).”²⁶

DeLillo’s image powerfully combines the passive *watching* of consumers with their vulnerability vis-a-vis the world in which it is more and more impossible to determine what is happening by one’s own reason and senses. The eerie beauty of the sunsets represents a perfect example of the technologically produced risks widely discussed before: the colors in the sky could be produced by deadly chemicals, but nobody knows. As Beck states, “the risks of civilization today typically *escape perception* and are localized in the sphere of *physical and chemical formulas* (e. g. toxins in foodstuff or the nuclear threat).”²⁷

An expert might tell the people what is going on – until another expert tries to disprove his or her assertion. Towards the end of the novel Jack starts to ignore the doctor who found the traces of Nyodene D in his blood. “He is eager to see my death progressing. He wants to insert me once more in the imaging block, where charged particles collide (...). But I am afraid of the imaging block. Afraid of its magnetic fields, its computerized nuclear pulse. Afraid of what it knows about me.”²⁸

In the second chapter, the relation between the loci of the college and the supermarket was pointed out. Thus, the fact that the novel ends in the supermarket and not at the College-on-the-Hill could be understood as DeLillo’s bleak statement on the significance and power of the academe within the limits of postindustrial consumer society.

In addition, the depiction of the supermarket needs to be read metaphorically: “The supermarket shelves have been rearranged. It happened one day without warning.” That is, one day the town was surprised by the “airborne toxic event;” some of its inhabitants grew more suspicious and reflective about what is happening around them, but no substantial change about their thinking and acting is to be expected. Only the supermarket shelves have been rearranged, the supermarket still stands and stays the same. “There is agitation and panic

²⁶ DeLillo 324.

²⁷ Beck 21.

²⁸ DeLillo 325.

in the aisles, dismay in the faces of older shoppers,”²⁹ but soon the consumers will get used to the new arrangement.

As Elaine Showalter states, “DeLillo presents the consumer check-out line as a metaphor for the American way of spirituality and death (...);”³⁰ one could only broaden her “American way” to the passive and herd “consumer mentality.” The very end of the novel elaborates on the above-stated:

In the altered shelves (...) they try to work their way through confusion. But in the end it doesn't matter what they see or what they think they see. The terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item infallibly. (...) This is where we wait together, regardless of age, our carts stocked with brightly colored goods. A slowly moving line, satisfying, giving us time to glance at the tabloids in the racks. Everything we need that is not food or love is here in the racks. The tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity. The cults of the famous and the dead.³¹

²⁹ DeLillo 325.

³⁰ Showalter 96.

³¹ DeLillo 326.

5. Commodification under Scrutiny

At the very beginning the skepticism of Nabokov, Roth and DeLillo regarding the value of academic education was mentioned. When delimiting the realm of postmodernism, Stephen R. C. Hicks says that “having rejected the notion of an independently existing reality, postmodernism denies that reason or any other method is a means of acquiring objective knowledge of that reality.”¹ Hicks briefly deals with the effect such a liberating premise has on postmodern conceptions of education: “Postmodern education should emphasize works not in the canon; it should focus on the achievements of the non-whites, females and the poor (...); and it should teach students that science’s method is no better to yielding truth than any other method (...).”²

The works analyzed in this thesis show that what such liberation of university education in postmodern times breeds is not so much the justice to long-oppressed minorities, as the penetration of the academe with the norms of consumer society. The refusal of the (at least limited) possibility of objective knowledge and the destabilization of the academic institution as the provider of scientific, and therefore superior, knowledge, approximate the students to consumers following only the rule of political correctness and their own opinion (desire, wish), while the teachers become intermediaries of knowledge simulacra. Thus, and not merely because of the existence of tuition, is the academe made open to the commodification processes of reification, banalization, fragmentation and spectacularization.

5. 1. Metafiction and Commodification

It was asserted that *Pnin*, *The Breast* and *White Noise* are all works of metafiction, which tends to comment on extra-textual phenomena by foregrounding its own fictionality. As Patricia Waugh says, the metafictional novel “situates its resistance *within* the form of the novel itself.”³

It has been demonstrated that the metafictional nature of the novels in question lies not only in their criticizing the academic environment from within the genre of academic novel. It is also the commodification itself what they reflect metafictionally, and it was shown that the above-mentioned processes are underlined in the novels not only as explicitly discussed maladies of the academe, but also by becoming narrative strategies.

¹ Stephen R. C. Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault* (Tempe, AZ and New Berlin, WI: Scholargy Publishing, 2004) 6.

² Hicks 18.

³ Waugh 11.

In the narrative structure of *Pnin* reification prevails. “The narrator wants to patronize Pnin when he can;”⁴ that is, to ridicule, dehumanize and objectify him. *The Breast* is based on the fact of fragmentation. Its protagonist is a fragment of himself – while retaining his thinking subjectivity, he is robbed of his body. Lastly, in the creation of the hyperreality of *White Noise* a proliferation of reality representations is employed, resulting in the spectacular banality.

5. 2 Commodification in the Course of Time

Pnin is set in the U. S. not long after World War II when “Americans learned that consuming for personal and national benefit was not only the right but a duty of citizenship, as America reconstructed its economy and society (...).”⁵ Nabokov does not deal with this aspect of postwar consumption explicitly; he merely registers the existence and availability of certain objects and goods - such as TV, false teeth, cars, housing – but we perceive them through the eyes of Pnin, whose perspective remains to be the one of the consumption based on *need*. Thus, the consumer politics of the times remains in the background and Nabokov focuses on the related topic of the penetration of consumption into the academe, a subject matter and the main setting of *Pnin*.

What might have moved him to stress its commodification is his own experience with the commodification of culture; that is, with the installment publication of his novel. Brian Boyd notes that when in January 1954 Nabokov wrote the second chapter of *Pnin* “He sent it off to the *New Yorker* on February 1 only to have it turned down as too ‘unpleasant,’”⁶ only because of portraying Liza and her husband as being too nasty to Pnin. He had similar difficulties with the publishing of the fifth chapter: “The magazine rejected the chapter because Nabokov refused to remove references – all historically accurate – to the regime of Lenin and Stalin: ‘medieval tortures in a Soviet jail,’ ‘Bolshevik dictatorship,’ ‘hopeless injustice.’”⁷ Political censorship could have hardly been involved; once more, Nabokov was being “too unpleasant”, and his book therefore potentially *less marketable*.

Nabokov’s critique of the commodification of the academe has the form of ridiculing silly eccentricities of particular individuals, which, nevertheless, result in the devaluation of college education as well as science: there is a professor who teaches a course on the philosophy of gesture, another one organizes the construction of a fake French village near

⁴ Wood 164.

⁵ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (London and New York: Vintage, 2003) 408.

⁶ Boyd 256.

⁷ Boyd 269-270.

the campus and psychiatrists use absurd psychological tests – the consequences of all that are not consistently developed. However, a sinister potential of commodification is suggested in the commodification of Pnin by the college staff members and especially the narrator: *the commodification of individual identity*, turning a man into “something that,” or the image of which, “can be exchanged commercially [not necessarily for money, but for an advantage, better status or service] and is less unique and perhaps also culturally and socially prized less simply because it has commercial value like other commodities.”⁸

The Breast was written towards the end of the golden era of the U. S. postwar prosperity (1945-1975),⁹ when the mass consumption had spread considerably and the television had served some twenty years in American households. Roth could thus articulate the interrelation between the consumer society and the media spectacle.

The fragmented identity of David Kepesh stresses two facts: firstly, the distance between his thinking subjectivity and the alien bodily form underlines the *self-commodification* he contemplates – that is, selling the image of the strange thing to the media and making a lot of money. Secondly, Kepesh’s vulnerability foregrounds the strengthening of the joint force of consumption and the spectacle: he finds it very hard to believe that somebody has not already sold or is not continually selling his images.

The fact that a college professor is so susceptible to the influence of the consumer society and the spectacle does not say anything positive about the capability of the academe to function as an alternative to these two phenomena. However, the above-stated is to some extent mitigated by Kepesh’s final invitation to everybody that they educate themselves, for there is no other way to the solution of problems.

The hyperreality of *White Noise* reflects the consumer society that has reached the stage of hyperconsumerism and in which *hypercommodification* reigns. Among the chief characteristics of hyperconsumer society Lipovetsky names the fact that to live an increasingly more comfortable, enjoyable life full of commercial novelties acquired the status an individual *right* and life purpose of the masses.¹⁰ In the hyperconsumer society we do not encounter individualism, but hyperindividualism. Lipovetsky defines the latter as the desynchronization of the activity of the members of one household enabled by their possessing a multiplicity of commodities of the same kind, such as TVs, cars, or computers.¹¹ Let us note that such a situation is predicted in *White Noise*; in Gladney’s household there is

⁸ “The Commodification of Identity,” ed. Ronald L. Jackson, *Encyclopedia of Identity*, vol. I (London and New Delhi: Sage, 2010) 107.

⁹ Cohen 403.

¹⁰ Lipovetsky 112.

¹¹ Lipovetsky 115.

one TV set, but it is easily movable, so everybody can watch TV in their own rooms: “I went up the stairs to Denise’s room, where the TV set was currently located.”¹²

Hyperconsumption is facilitated by various tools making it more abstract, and therefore easy. As George Ritzer remarks, “Not too long ago it was nearly impossible to shop at the mall or gamble in the casino without cash. However, today cash is being progressively replaced in many consumption settings by credit cards, debit cards,”¹³ or Internet shopping, for which merely a set of numbers is needed. Jack Gladney is not yet able to enjoy the delights of Internet, but he is aware of the dangerous ease of spending in the ways mentioned above. Because of that, going to the bank to check his balance is an experience of great tension for him: “The figure on the screen roughly corresponded to my independent estimate, feebly arrived at after long searches through documents, tormented arithmetic. Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system has blessed my life.”¹⁴

As Vannini, Waskul and Gottschalk put it, “Hyperconsumption promotes sensory saturation, intensification, and segmentation (...).”¹⁵ In *White Noise* the sense of saturation is conveyed by both the proliferation of the consumer goods described to the last detail of their packaging and the multiplicity of media and scholarly representations of reality, conveying the sense that nothing new can be known. Reality is *hypercommodified*, which means that commodification has encompassed everything.

Having traced the development from the consumption based on need to the consumption based on desire, it remains to be asked what follows next. According to Bauman “The wish replaces desire as the motivating force of consumption,”¹⁶ as something more transient, superficial and individualistic. Brown states that “A consumption culture, predicated upon the belief in ever-rising living standards, efficiency in production, and the intrinsic value of a commodity oriented lifestyle has undermined personal autonomy.”¹⁷ Following the development of commodification from *Pnin* to *The Breast* and to *White Noise* reveals a gradual loss of autonomy – both of individual characters and the academic institution.

Pnin’s Waindell College is commercialized, but he escapes it and at least struggles for personal autonomy. Kepesh is determined to continue his education, but finds it hard to believe that he could escape the spectacle. The College-on-the-Hill from *White Noise*

¹² DeLillo 103.

¹³ George Ritzer, *Explorations in the Sociology of Consumption: Fast Food, Credit Cards and Casinos* (London, New Delhi and Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2001) 154.

¹⁴ DeLillo 46.

¹⁵ Phillip Vannini, Denis Waskul and Simon Gottschalk, *The Senses in Self, Society and Culture* (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2012) 155.

¹⁶ Bauman 75.

becomes a full-fledged part of the system of hypercommodification: a generator of the representations of hypercommodified society and culture – of the simulacra of knowledge. The characters of *White Noise*, inhabitants of the hypercommodified society, whose existence is threatened by unpredictable risks, have just enough autonomy to wait in a supermarket line.

¹⁷ David Brown, “The Dialectics of Consumption,” eds. Gabriel R. Ricci and Paul Gottfired, *Culture and Consumption* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2000) 1.

6. Conclusion

David Brown states that “Where the ethics of accumulation has won out, patterns of local control, traditional value systems, spiritual life, and other forms of cultural expression have been gutted.”¹ Although he does not explicitly mention academic or other education and knowledge or information production, his assertion definitely applies also to those.

We decided to study the reflection of the influence of consumer society on knowledge and education in *Pnin*, *The Breast* and *White Noise*, because we believe the invasion of the norms of the consumer society into the sphere of education and passing over of knowledge has serious consequences for how information is handled and perceived as well as for what is considered knowledge and education.

The topic could not have been dealt with without a degree of interdisciplinarity; the thesis partly follows the approach of cultural studies, which combine the perspectives of literary studies and sociology and “see cultural value as socially constructed.”² From the sphere of sociology the differences between various patterns of consumption, the “public arenas model” and the concept of “risk society” were revealed as particularly helpful for the discussion of our topic.

The given postmodern academic novels were chosen because they enable one to make use of their self-reflective and openly metafictional nature, and because of the inventive narrative strategies of all three texts it was possible to do so also on the level of narrative structure. Last but not least, their years of origin opened us the way for summarizing how the development of the U.S. consumer society in the second half of the twentieth century is reflected in the given novels.

6. 1. Cultural Logic of Postmodernism

Towards the beginning of the first chapter the connection between the knowledge and power was underlined; what is the central question of this thesis is how that connection is reflected in the novels we deal with. Fredric Jameson describes postmodernism as “seemingly disembodied cultural logic,”³ which is actually the cultural logic of late capitalism involving the spread of consumer society. Its “seemingly disembodied” nature, its omnipresence and inconspicuousness, requires individuals who would be able to see through it. However, no such individuals are typically produced by the cultural logic of late capitalism.

¹ Brown 1.

² Andrew Miller, *Literature, Culture and Society*, 2nd ed. (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2005) 15.

In Baudrillard's words, today's "consumer is sovereign in a jungle of ugliness where *freedom of choice has been forced upon him*:"⁴ he or she is robbed of the freedom not to choose. Furthermore, as Lipovetsky notes, the increasing market segmentation in the hyperconsumer society induces more and more subtleties in one's needs and attitudes,⁵ and thereby enhances the individualization of consumers. It appears that they are given unprecedented freedom – everyone can choose the item which is most suitable for him or her; in reality, they are *formed* in such a way that they would wish for an increasing number of personalized consumer items to serve them in more and more spheres of life.

This thesis has demonstrated that what knowledge and education subject to the norms of consumer society lack is exactly freedom – in the sense of autonomy and independence, the traditional privileges of the academic institution. As it was shown in the second chapter, all of the novels we discussed portray the characters of professors who consciously reduce themselves to the status of celebrities and are depicted as being more dependent than children. Their infantilization is always connected to their fascination with the abundance of consumer goods or the spectacle. The third and the fourth chapters revealed the gradual vanishing of the protagonists' autonomy: Pnin's story is an emblem of a quest for autonomy; Kepesh is highly dependent on his surroundings, but apart from the belief in the omnipresence of the spectacle, he articulates also a firm belief in education; Gladney is completely enmeshed in the mechanisms of consumer society.

Apart from autonomy and independence, the knowledge produced within the mechanisms of the consumer society and the education functioning under such conditions lack simply *themselves*, they lack their own significance. They succumb to the "aestheticization of the real world," Wolfgang Iser speaks about: "Today, we are living amidst an aestheticization of the real world formerly unheard of. Embellishment and styling are to be found everywhere."⁶ Baudrillard calls it the "'aesthetic' hallucination of reality,"⁷ while revealing its power to turn reality into its simulacrum.

As it was demonstrated in the second chapter, most characters of professors from the novels we discussed work out of habit and for the sake of retaining or enhancing their status – the impression they give, their appearance. What they participate in has the form of educational process, it takes place in a class and the like, but its content is a mere aestheticization of reality: a description of gestures or fascinated speeches about how

³ Jameson xviii.

⁴ Baudrillard 72.

⁵ Lipovetsky 91.

⁶ Wolfgang Iser, *Undoing Aesthetics* (London: Sage, 1997) 81.

⁷ Baudrillard, "Symbolic Exchange and Death" 149.

fascinating Hitler was. The reality aestheticized by the spectacle is shown as increasingly valued over the reality explained by the academe in the novels we dealt with; ultimately, they merge.

6. 2 Consumption as a Positive Phenomenon

The argument of this thesis could be criticized or elaborated on first and foremost by considering consumption as well as its relation to knowledge and education contrastingly: as a positive phenomenon. While the condemnatory analyses of consumer society prevail, there are also attempts to foreground its beneficiary influence.

For example, Robert Bocoock notes that “where masculinity continues to be defined in terms of fighting, the arrival of a consumer culture, (...) in which masculine identity is constructed around consumption patterns in clothing, cars, music or sports, might be seen as a form of social, even moral progress (...).”⁸ Thus, one could discuss the relation between the masculine identity, education and consumption.

Alternatively, the relation between the consumer society and the basic premises of postmodernism could be traced further, and one might focus on the increased availability of college education to the minorities to whom it has long been denied. In a similar vein Lizabeth Cohen states that “when African Americans and women used their influence in consumer markets to assert themselves politically, or when young people and senior citizens gained greater recognition as profitable market segments and then, in turn, as political constituencies,” the state politics of consumption “substantially advanced the progressive goals of social inclusion.”⁹

Lipovetsky deals with another facet of postmodern consumerism that places the issue of consumerism and knowledge into the light which has not yet been discussed here. He underlines the fact that hyperconsumers are more and more socially and ecologically aware, which affects their manner of consumption: “In our societies people no longer consume merely objects, films and holidays – they also buy ethical and ecological products.”¹⁰ Lipovetsky sees this as a highly influential trend, which leads to the merging of previously irreconcilable categories, whose perception is thereby bound to change. Lipovetsky states that there are no longer discrepancies between individualism and altruism, idealism and delight in the spectacle or consumerism and generosity.¹¹

⁸ Bocoock 112.

⁹ Cohen 403.

¹⁰ Lipovetsky 147. Translation mine.

¹¹ Lipovetsky 148.

6. 3. British Academic Novels

It is possible to elaborate on the topic of this thesis also by choosing different texts to work with; since the academic novel is to a great extent an anglophone genre, British academic novels would represent a logical choice. There is no denying that especially the post-1968 British academic novel portrays the academic environment with as much skepticism as its American counterpart. Although the history of the consumer society in Britain differs from its development in the U. S., where it had to overcome no firm boundaries of social class, many parallels could surely be observed, as regards our topic.

For Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954), one of the most famous British post-war academic novels, the above-mentioned class issues are of considerable importance. Moreover, the novel criticizes not so much the main protagonist's staying at the university merely for the sake of having a job, as the incompetence of older professors, who also have the tendency to exploit their younger colleagues. In the end, Jim luckily escapes to work for a rich man. David Lodge's novel *Changing Places* (1975) alone offers some ground for the comparative analysis of the British and American academe. It remains to be asked whether the novel's statement on the effect of consumer society on both academic environments transcends the account of humorous discrepancies between American abundance and British gray modesty. The influence of the consumer society in *The History Man* (1975) by Malcolm Bradbury might be particularly interesting to discuss, since the novel deals with student radicalism, a key force behind the liberalization of postmodern education, and the sexual revolution.

In addition, it could be fruitful to turn to newer works for a subtler analysis of the influence of consumer society mechanism on the British academe. For instance, Howard Jacobson's *The Finkler Question* (2010) is not a typical academic novel, the protagonists' time at the university is only remembered there, but it contains an interesting juxtaposition of two friends of whom one was "a modular, bits-and-pieces man at university, not studying anything recognizable as a subject but fitting components of different arts-related disciplines, not to say indisiplines, together like Lego pieces."¹² The other man studied moral philosophy at Oxford and then made a lot of money publishing popularization books named "The Existentialist in the Kitchen" or "The Little Book of Household Stoicism."¹³

Naturally, our topic is not unreflected in the criticism dealing with British academic novels, though it is approached differently. Let us call attention to J. P. Kenyon's comparison of academic novels with Business novels: according to him, they both "portray human relationships which are also power relationships, and they are set in status-competitive

¹² Howard Jacobson, *The Finkler Question* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010) 7.

situations which are equally important in business as in higher education – probably more so.”¹⁴

6. 4. Beyond Comedy

Many critics dealing with academic novels (especially with those from the 1970s onwards) notice what was mentioned at the very beginning of this thesis: these novels’ skepticism about the quality of knowledge one can acquire at a college or university, about the faculty, about the academic institution as the realm of academic freedom: “For many individuals, colleges and universities existed in large part to enhance the search for truth by the faculty. Academic freedom codified the belief about the search for truth.”¹⁵ Thus, if the faculty members’ search for truth or truths is questioned, the concept of academic freedom is undermined.

According to Leslie Fiedler, academic novels reflect mostly the following aspects of the academic institution: “its small politics and petty spites, its institutionalized hypocrisy, its self-righteous timidity, and its endless bureaucratic ineptitude.”¹⁶ Robert F. Scott states that “even when campus novels are lightly satirical in tone, they nonetheless exhibit a seemingly irresistible tendency to trivialize academic life and to depict academia as a world that is both highly ritualized and deeply fragmented.”¹⁷ The critics of academic novels also note that students appear in them mostly as marginal characters: “teaching is not only unimportant, it is irrelevant. Students are treated as objects, if they are discussed at all, and faculty receive little, if any, delight in teaching.”¹⁸

What this thesis reveals as the main cause of the above-sketched state of affairs – as far as the three novels analyzed here are concerned – is the intrusion of the commodification mechanisms into the academic environment. Some critics touch upon the commercialization of the academe: “Ironically, academic freedom has been replaced as the central totem of the university by tenure,”¹⁹ Tierney states. Showalter notes that from the 1970s onwards academic novels portray increasingly more academics “motivated less by faith and service than by ambition and the longing for power (...).”²⁰ However, we suggest that the prime

¹³ Jacobson 22.

¹⁴ J. P. Kenyon, “Lucky Jim and After: The Business of University Novels,” ed. Merrit Moseley, *The Academic Novel: New and Classic Essays* (Chester: Chester Academic Press, 2007) 97.

¹⁵ William G. Tierney, “Academic Freedom and Tenure: Between Fiction and Reality,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 75. 2 (Mar.-Apr. 2004): 161.

¹⁶ Leslie Fiedler, “The War Against the Academy,” ed. Merrit Moseley, *The Academic Novel: New and Classic Essays* (Chester: Chester Academic Press, 2007) 52.

¹⁷ Robert F. Scott, “It’s a Small World, After All,” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 37. 1 (Spring 2004): 83.

¹⁸ Tierney 172.

¹⁹ Tierney 175.

²⁰ Showalter 146.

danger about commodification in the academe lies not only in money and power as the key motivational factors for academics, but especially in the consumer habits, mindsets and ways of perception infiltrating the academic environment.

Scott asserts that “In terms of their prevailing formal qualities and stylistic tendencies, campus novels are essentially comedies of manners.”²¹ The problem is that to define them so seems to pose a hindrance to their complex critical reflection. We considered the texts we studied more than comedies and satires, and acknowledged their political potential (in the sense explained in the section 1. 1); it opened us the way for the illuminating approach combining the employment of sociological concepts and literary analysis.

To the topic of the commodification of knowledge in academic novels such an approach has not yet been applied. Some critics begin to recognize the value of academic novels’ reflection of socio-cultural reality, though: for example Jesse Kavadlo in her essay on the academic novels of the Clinton Era, the period after “the Cold War and before War on Terror [that] presents a window into understanding several overlapping American anxieties – about predatory sexuality versus prudery, the relationship between public and private behavior, and the legacy of the 1960s.”²²

Let us conclude by stating that if academic novels criticize the diminishing power of the academic institution it is not because intellectuals and academics would want usurp too much power for themselves or want to be the leaders at any price, as some critics suggest: “If we are to create conditions for empowerment, for example, then the intellectual cannot think of him – or herself as in the vanguard where others necessarily follow.”²³ It is because the academic institution and its representatives have a potential to function as a needed cultural counterweight to the consumer society.

²¹ Scott 83.

²² Jesse Kavadlo, “Blue Angels Meet Dying Animals: Textual and Sexual Subversion in the Clinton-Era Academic Novel,” *The Journal of the Midwest Language Associations* 37. 2 (Autumn 2004): 12.

²³ Tierney 175.

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