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History, Art and Consumerism— Richard Powers' *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*

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Abstract

This article analyzes three narrative lines as depicted in Richard Powers' *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (1985) and the way his depiction of real, photographed, present and past characters along with a narrative reference to a photograph create a metafictional and intertextual frameworks through the use of which Powers symbolically points out a sensibility of the late 20th century and its difference from early 20th century related to the vision of the world, understanding of reality, art, and history. In addition, the article emphasizes Powers' use of postmodern allegory and the way it creates another meaning which points out a commercial and consumerist character of the 20th century and which also symbolically represents a history of technical and artistic depiction of the world.

Keywords

art, consumerism, postmodernism, history, past, allegory, metafiction, intertextuality

Richard Powers' novel *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* is seemingly a traditional narrative reminiscent of social commentary on the situation in Western Europe during the World War I which depicts social and psychological effects of war on everyday life of people. He, however, juxtaposes this narrative line to contemporary story of modern life represented by two protagonists living in American urban setting. Moreover, he further complicates and extends the story by dealing and playing with the idea of a depiction and creation of reality, facts, and truth from the point of view of the observer and the observed, creators and perceivers of reality. All three stories of different characters are narrated from different perspectives and all are somehow connected with the past, especially with the beginning of the 20th century, the World War I and its politics. Most characters, especially these from two narrative lines depicting the narrative present, that is the 1980's (an unnamed ironic and witty narrator P., a writer for a computer company news, and Peter Mays, a stockbroker) do not have a direct experience with the past but they are connected with it through its indirect reconstruction and reproduction represented either by a narrative of other characters (creators of reality) or through their own study of historical materials and "facts". Through this indirect narrative reconstruction of the past Powers not only comments on the World War I effects on the life of common people, their personal tragedies, on the power of propaganda and the impact of the contemporary corrupted politics on the life of people, on the historical background of the European immigration to the USA, but he also gives a history of the media which create reality. What dominates in the novel is especially Powers' depiction of the changing nature of both continents (Europe and North America) from the 19th century to the present. This change is also connected with the changing sensibility of the 20th century as mostly expressed through Powers' depiction of newly emerging technologies, their connection to business, economy and politics. In addition, Powers's narrative also deals with the role of new technologies (photography) in the production and creation of reality. To emphasize this, Powers uses a sophisticated imagery associated with the idea of technology (cars, Henry Ford, photography, the city of Detroit, computer companies), politics (socialist and nationalist ideas as represented by three farmers, by Ford, politicians, the World War I), economy, business and consumerism (urban setting, products sale, eating in restaurants,

inclusion of comments on economy and its value), and art (August Sanders' and others' photographs, Diego Rivera's mural paintings in Detroit, USA, ballet, theater, and the cinema).

As it was mentioned above, two narrative lines are associated with the present and they refer to the past indirectly. The story of an unnamed narrator, P, is a story of a lonely stockbroker living in the modern city, bored by his work and interested in arts and history through the study of which he rediscovers the past. The story of Peter Mays, narrated also from the first-person narration point of view, is a story of another contemporary man, a minor writer for a computer company news. This story is reminiscent of a love romance between him and Alicia Stark, a waitress which eventually turns out to be a story of his discovery of the past through his passionate admiration of an actress (theatre, art again) playing modern monodrama about Sarah Bernard. The role contemporary actress plays, that is that of Sarah Bernard, is also associated with Europe and the World War I. Mays' recuperation of the past is a return to his family roots and turns out to be a history of his family emigration which implies a symbolic connection between Europe and the USA, past and present, a history of both the artistic and technological transmission of knowledge and reality to a new land, that is the USA.

Both these stories are marked by a certain mystery, unreliability and unexpected twists (Peter Mays, all characters' connection to the picture of Three Farmers, unexpected heritage— Alison Stark, for example, revelation of history—Mrs. Schreck) but all are also closely connected with the picture entitled "Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance" made by a famous photographer, August Sanders, in 1914, and with the farmers' story (through the admiration of the photograph an unnamed narrator discovers a mystery of Mrs. Schreck's connection to one of the farmers, a photographer, her European background and heritage— after arrival to the U.S.A. she adapted a name of one of the men on the picture because he was reminiscent of her disappeared lover; and Peter Mays traces his European background, unexpected heritage and connection to an iconic representative of an American industry from the beginning of the century, Henry Ford, because of his meeting with one of the men in the picture, an unwilling journalist admired by Ford). The last story line is different and gives a story of three men of different nationalities going to a dance during May Day of 1914, that is shortly before the beginning of the World War I. This story is narrated from a rather traditional point of view and gives close social observations and depiction of the setting as well as of personal histories of three young men from 1914 onwards. The narrator's third person omniscient narration enables Powers to give a close social observation, to depict the feelings of the characters, their perception of the politics and war, their emotional condition, love affairs, understanding of history and art. This narrative line begins in the following way:

Three men walk down a muddy road at late afternoon, two obviously young, one in indeterminate age. They walk leisurely . . . They may be brothers. All three carry canes; the singer waves his in a simple, monotonous sweep, conducting his own performance . . . It is the first of May in the Rhineland Province of Prussia, 1914 . . . Faintly over the newly planted fields comes the odor of the last five years' compost and fresh manure. With this smell, equally faint, comes the sound of an orchestra. (Powers 17-18)

As can be seen from this passage, this narrative line is reminiscent of traditional realistic writing pretending to give a truthful, objective and realistic picture of reality, but its narrative credibility is undermined by a narrator's revelation, in the context of other two stories and the picture on the cover of the book, that this narrative is rather a metanarrative, that is a reconstruction of the story from a position of an omniscient narrator becoming not only an observer, but also an interpreter and constructor of reality and meaning. So, while this story indicates a movement from the past to the present, the other two narrative lines indicate the movement from the present to the past in an attempt to reconstruct it and understand a connection between the past and present, Europe and the USA, old and a new century, art and the means of its production, politics, and business. Thus, all narratives' main focus is a photograph and its interpretation evoking several meanings. The men in the picture move in the muddy country road and are staring towards indefinite horizon being taken by a photographer whom, as a reader learns, they do not believe. They are, however, later convinced to buy the pictures. The farmers' movement symbolically expresses a transition from an old to a new century characterized

by different social, technical and economic condition. As the narrator observes, “Along a muddy road, just beyond a white, right-hand border, out of the frame, they head toward either a dance, complete with young woman—call her Alicia—or that unmitigated act of violence called the twentieth century” (Powers 212).

As can be seen from the extract, the farmers’ movement is a movement towards folk, popular music and entertainment which evokes an abandonment of the old, 19th century’s agrarianism, and which indicates a forthcoming importance of popular and mass culture. The photographer himself embodies a new character, the relationship between technology, art, consumption, consumerism and “reproduction”. The farmers do not trust a photographer, that is a new technology enabling a producer to create a massive reproduction of the objects of consumption, the photographs in this case. Thus, on the one hand, these (artistic) objects lose “the aura” (Benjamin 2008) of their originality and, at the same time, become reproducible to create profit as characterized by Walter Benjamin in his famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* of 1935.

As Benjamin indicates, the reproducibility of art in the 20th century causes a loss of authenticity, it becomes accessible to masses but, at the same time, it enables to produce a detail and reality which is impossible to see through a natural observation. It can be seen in the following extract in which Powers points out a commodification of art in the 20th century Jamesonian late capitalism through the narrator’s comments on Mays: “. . . Mays hit on the connection between music and market mania. One dealt in bulls and bears, the other in crescendos and diminuendos. But both were about hidden movements, contexts, worldless proofs...Both dealt in cult objects, collectibles. Abstractions made the best purchasable commodities.” (112).

Also as John Dewey observes, a great benefit of the machine age as depicted in this novel is the availability of art for masses not only for the privileged, and this availability of art is caused by a mass production (27). Thus, it is not random that Powers uses a complicated intertextual allusions to and quotations from Benjamin’s work to point out a changed nature of art and its connection to business, consumerism and politics in the 20th century.

Powers’ pointing out the connection between art, consumption, consumerism and politics manifests itself in all narrative lines of his novel. The plot reconstruction of the farmers’ story indicates their connection to art, its mechanical reproduction and commerce by buying and keeping a photograph of themselves; by Peter’s later status of a war journalist (paid for the production of news, the newspapers); and through his meeting with an iconic representative of production (of cars), business, and consumption, that is Henry Ford. This meeting also implies a symbolic connection between economy and politics which manifests itself in Powers’s intertextual comments on Ford’s biography and a depiction of his unsuccessful mission to stop the war (a Peace sailing of a commercial ship from the USA to Europe) organized by him. Peter May, in another narrative line, wants to become rich through his alleged heritage associated with his ancestors and their connection to mechanical reproduction producing profit as represented by Henry Ford, a typical early 20th century American industrialist, and he is interested in art not because of the quality of the artistic performance, but because of its ability to “reproduce” the past revealing not only his ethnic, but possible economic background for which he has to pay (to buy the tickets); and an unnamed narrator finds the city of Detroit to be a perfect representation of the mass reproducibility expressed through the connection among business, mass consumption (as a city of cars), art imitating other (European) arts (Renaissance Center in Detroit, evoking the image of mechanical reproduction), and art’s consumerist character (Rivera’s mural paintings which he was paid for, the photography in the museum) to which, however, Mays has an ironic distance. In addition, Powers illustrates a commercial character of art and its changing status (reproducibility) in the new century through a depiction of Sander, the author of the photograph of three dancers, the narrator’s comments on him and other businessmen as well as their own views on art. The narrator comments on Sanders saying that “Sanders always considered photography a trade, a livelihood earned by hard work. Art and income were bound together. In addition to documenting the working class, Sander specialized in commercially lucrative commemoratives. He photographed emigrants departing for America” (Powers 40).

Through a depiction and characterization of personalities in the novel, Powers points out a transition from the individual to mass production, from original to reproducible art, from traditional, hierarchical to the mass society, from the past to the present, from the old to a new century the main features of which are *mass society and (re) production, industrialism, technology and self-reflexivity* as exemplified by sciences, arts, and theories. While the farmers represent a traditional, hierarchical, rural society and agricultural production, Sander is a symbolic precursor of a new century also because of his understanding of production. This late 20th century period is characterized by advanced technologies influencing individuals' perception of the world (computers and computer companies most of the characters representing this narrative line are associated with). In Powers' narrative, this sensibility of a new, that is 20th century, is marked by impersonalization and boredom. On the other hand, Powers' use of self-reflexivity implies partly also an ironic distance from both periods, the early 20th and late 20th centuries. The self-reflexivity is represented by various theories, comments, intertextual allusions, observations, theorizing about theories all creating a complicated a meta-theoretical framework incorporated in the narrative frame of all stories. Powers's narrative becomes not only a self-reflexive history of two centuries, but also of their sensibility, of the history of immigration, the history of war and its connection to politics and production, the history of changing sensibility and the visions of the world as perceived by common people, politicians, businessmen and artists. Understanding of individuals' lives as a symbolic expression of the sensibility of the period further anticipates their changed roles in the contemporary, that is rather postmodern period of the 1980's. While, in Powers' novel, the early 20th century is characterized by the appreciation of industrialists and artists, late 20th century is depicted as the period worshipping the icons of the popular and mass culture such as actors, singers, and sportsmen who become subjects of mass production and manipulation. Reflecting on Sarah Bernhardt, Peter Mays observers that "We are left to pick out of the reproduction the auburn mop, the other-worldly movement, to reconstruct, despite the machine, the cult of this personality . . . But her contemporaries chased the red-haired Sarah forward in time, into the promise of a new century. We can at best chase the reproduction backward for some misunderstood resemblance" (Powers 172).

This also manifests itself, for example, in Peter Mays's worshipping of the popular actress imitating, reproducing and playing another actress, Sarah Berthrand representing the earlier period.

The self-reflexive observation as suggested above can be seen in the following extract in which the narrator comments on Peter Mays' perception of the world reminiscent of the mental image of the changing spirit of several centuries:

Mays had trouble with this one. Production and consumption came to the same marketplace, and he could not see the virtue of one over the other. His mind was elsewhere—on Nurse Cavell, on Sarah Bernhardt, and not least of all on Kimberley Greene, who he wished had not turned out to be so substantial. His mind was on patriotism not being enough, politics not being enough, producing, consuming, all amounting to little in the climate of endless violence. (Powers 201)

Watching the theatre performance and the consequent associations in Peter Mays' mind thus symbolically express the spirit of the postmodern period: its self-reflexiveness, its consumerist character, violence but also chaos. The idea of self-reflexivity is incorporated in the narrative process through the narrators' comments through the process of which they express a self-reflexive nature of the whole contemporary postmodern period as manifested in the real life, theories, individual and public speech as well as in the sciences and technology.

Allegory and Breaking Binary Oppositions

The metafictional elements in the novel represent a contemporary sensibility by the incorporation of the comments on the theories and histories which break a clear, unified, and chronological vision of the world and traditional binary oppositions. Many chapters include comments on arts, on the theory of arts, history, film, theories and philosophies themselves (on Walter Benjamin, chapter 19, for example). The binary oppositions are broken and best exemplified by a metaphor of three-dimensionality and the stereoscope implying both technology and three-dimensionality. In James Hurt's view, "Powers draws

upon parallax to bring his three stories into three-dimensional focus and thus signals his novel's affinity with Joyce's *Ulysses*" (24). And Flores Valadié further comments on the function of three-dimensionality in Powers' fiction: "It is therefore the perception of the object at two different times that can result in a vision in three dimensions. In Powers' fiction, such an image, both original and reconstructed, both material and imaginary, both past and present, is invested with an aura of its own" (online).

In my view, three-dimensionality is represented by the three stories themselves each of which overlaps with and develops the imagery and motifs from the other one, all being connected through the image of a photograph, its meaning and connotations it evokes. This three-dimensionality is further developed through Powers' playing with characters' status of the objects and subjects, observers and the observed all creating an allegorical dimension of the novel further creating an allegorical history of the vision and perception of reality from the 19th century up to the narrative present, that is the 1980'. It is not a traditional allegory with moral and didactic intent, but rather a postmodern, fragmented allegory as understood by Craig Owens. In his view, "In allegorical structure, then, one text is read through another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship may be; the paradigm for the allegorical work is thus the palimpsest . . . Conceived in this way, allegory becomes the model of all commentary, all critique, insofar as these are involved in rewriting a primary text in terms of its figural meaning" (54).

Powers' novel thus can be read, through various different works and theories included in his novel as intertextual and metafictional elements as a novel on the history of vision and perception of reality. This novel can also be read as a novel on a changed position and understanding of the subject-object relations as represented by different "discourses" such as literature, arts, science, and various theories themselves. The narrator P comments on the stereopticon and its meaning suggesting a three-dimensionality:

One context did not replace the other but existed concurrently, like the two views needed to create the illusion of depth in a stereoscope . . .

With two slightly different views of the photo—the essayistic and the imagined—side by side, I needed only the stereopticon itself to bring the image into fleshy three-dimensionality. Walking home through the drifts of the dark, I began to imagine what shape that machine might take, I saw the thin film of the image spreading out in two directions, back through the past, through catastrophe, to that idyllic day that had brought the taker and subjects together, and forward, far forward in time until the product of that day crossed the path of one who, like me, took on the obligation of seeing.

Perhaps this third element, the viewer, would arrive at the notion that the photo carried some personal legacy for him, a message woven into the complex personal history of his work, family, and love. (Powers 334).

This extract symbolically depicts an erasure of the boundaries between the perceiver and the perceived reality, between subject and object, between a writer, a producer, and a reader, that is a perceiver, an interpreter and observer. Such a view and vision blurs traditional Cartesian division between the subject and object. In Powers' novel, all become equal and form their own story and vision of the world which interacts with the other visions and interpretations of the world and create an interactive image of reality none of which is privileged but all are mutually interconnected and create a pluralistic and interactive vision of the world and sensibility typical of the late 20th century.

Conclusion

In his novel *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*, Powers gives three different stories connected with three different periods. All these stories are loosely associated with a photograph depicting three farmers on their way to a dance at the beginning of the century. These narratives create a three-dimensional and cyclical picture of reality and undermine both traditional realistic, but also modernist and, in a way, postmodernist narrative techniques. They represent an artistic commentary on a complicated nature of history, violence and the transition between the 19th and the 20th century, the

history of immigration, the connection between technology, business and art, and a difference between pre-industrial, industrial and late capitalistic periods. In addition to this, based on the allegorical principle and developing the image of three-dimensionality, Powers also comments on history of the vision of the world as perceived in these different periods as well as the history of these periods' technical and artistic representation through a depiction of a changing status of the role of an observer and the perceived, observed object.

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