

KNOWABLE CONSPIRACIES: A REASSESSMENT OF FORMAL AND IDEOLOGICAL ASPECTS IN JONATHAN FRANZEN'S *THE TWENTY-SEVENTH CITY*

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13

1. Introduction: complicating pictures

Jonathan Franzen is one of the most prominent American novelists of our time both in terms of sales figures and critical assent, but his work has given rise to a conspicuously small amount of academic criticism to date. A significant part of that academic engagement with Franzen's work has been of a political nature and for the most part rather critical. Thus, Franzen's third and highly successful novel, *The Corrections* (2001), was rather censoriously analysed by Annesley (2006) from a political point of view. Evidently influenced by the latter, Hutchinson (2009) and Hawkins (2010) provided accounts of Franzen's work which also included an analysis of his previous fiction. In spite of individual differences, all three critics coincide in denying Franzen's work a truly progressive character and even accuse the novelist of inadvertently reinforcing the system he is out to criticize. Although their assessment concerns chiefly *The Corrections*, Hutchinson and Hawkins trace to Franzen's first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988), the origin of what they see as Franzen's inadequate ideological stance, namely a deterministic view of the capitalist system as an intractable entity immune to all attempts at progressive reform. The problem with categorical dismissals such as this is that they often prevent in-depth examination and attention to the wider ideological context. Thus, while acknowledging some grounds for these critics' claims, this article aims

to complement their somewhat reductionist view of *The Twenty-Seventh City* with an ideological account that is attentive to the historico-cultural determinants which act upon Franzen's political stance, as well as to the ideological constraints at play derived from the specific formal characteristics of the novel. This will be accompanied by an assessment of the novel's Utopian stake in the light of Fredric Jameson's theory and a new appraisal of its place within the whole of Franzen's work.

In matters of form, Franzen's career is characterized by a stylistic evolution from a postmodernist-influenced fiction to a more traditional, realist narrative. In this regard, *The Twenty-Seventh City* has often been ascribed to the distinctively postmodern genre of the Systems novel. Certainly, the scope of the novel's social critique is wide enough to be called systemic. In the same way, the motif of conspiracy, elevated to postmodernist fetish by Pynchon and DeLillo, plays a fundamental part in this novel. As Franzen has put it, he adopted "a lot of that generation of writers' concerns —the great postwar freak-out, the Strangeloveian inconceivabilities, the sick society in need of radical critique. I was attracted to crazy scenarios" (in Antrim 2001). Thus it is that, in a rather typical Pynchonesque way, the novel's scenario is indeed weird: a cabal from India infiltrates the St. Louis police force with the aim of gradually taking control of the city's politics and economy. However, Franzen's strictly narrative-formal development is a considerably more complex affair than critical accounts usually imply and this is reflected in *The Twenty-Seventh City*. On this subject, we will be discussing how *The Twenty-Seventh City*, commonly taken as the most markedly postmodernist of Franzen's novels, presents certain distinctively realist attributes, namely an obvious topographic quality, a calling —even if not fully realized— for the representation of different social groups as inextricably connected, a world view relentlessly based on contingency, and, not least of all, an aversion to showing radical social change all of which may be regarded as nothing but realist. This makes for a remarkable, unresolved tension between the two different approaches to the novelistic form, the realist and the postmodernist, which coexist within *The Twenty-Seventh City*.¹ As one of the most influential critics of Franzen has argued, there was always a realist writer in Franzen, "hidden beneath all the Po-Mo machinery" (Rebein 2007: 204).

There are some interesting peculiarities as well in the novel's conspiracy. Conspiracy has often been referred to by Jameson as a substitute for an adequate mapping of an all too complex totality (e.g. Jameson 1991: 38). In postmodernist fiction, usually influenced by post-structuralist theoretical tenets, conspiracies have often become a manifestation of the perceived impossibility of attaining any kind of unassailable social knowledge or meaning. In contrast, in Franzen's first novel the conspiracy,

controlled by chief Jammu with a panopticon-style system of surveillance, is rather a narrative means to pry into the different power hubs of St. Louis, and as such performs an analytic function which is a main attribute of classic realism, as we discuss below. In a way, since, rather unusually, we are shown the two sides of the conspiracy—that of the schemers and that of their victims—we could speak, paraphrasing Raymond Williams, of a *knowable* conspiracy², one that is intended to force the reader to *listen* and *see* and thus increase her social and political awareness.

2. The (non-)politics of irony: agency and apathy

The ideological implications of Franzen's implausible conspiracy of Indians may be further probed. Its sheer unlikeliness and the suspension of disbelief it requires, are revealing of the difficulty of conceiving radical change in a contemporary American society which has not only lost all trace of the relations of production but also the memories of any other modes of production. Hawkins argues that choosing a foreign origin for the conspirators enables Franzen to “render literal the xenophobia that is the byproduct of the exceptionalist nature of American nationalism” (Hawkins 2010: 65). It seems more likely though that what the Indian origin of the plot really affords Franzen is the possibility of bringing forth a group of people who seem genuinely capable of transformative action. It is significant that such people must come from the Third World, a locus which for a long time has evoked in the Western imagination an “outside” —to use Jameson's term— still unassimilated by totalizing systems. It simply appears that any such capacity for agency should be conceived on American soil. The (dubious) revolution must be imported then, smuggled in, under suspicious certificates of verisimilitude, from what Žižek has called “the mythical Other Place where the authentic happens [...] and for which Western intellectuals have an inexhaustible need” (Žižek 2008: 108). The system, however, will prove unassailable and the conspiracy fails mainly due to generalized apathy. In the novel, the only foreseeable event of consequence is nuclear war, a possibility which does not seem to change the widespread torpor either, perhaps because after all an impending apocalypse renders any prospective change pointless. Consequently the novel ends with a suffocating atmosphere of stagnation which has earned Franzen hard-hitting criticism from otherwise perhaps not so distant ideological quarters. In order to fully grasp the nature of this critical animosity, we need to briefly examine the novel's plot.

The Twenty-Seventh City is a novel in which a group of Indian conspirators, led by newly-appointed police chief Jammu, are intent on carrying out a large-scale political and financial operation aimed at reversing the flow of capital from the increasingly derelict inner St. Louis to the affluent municipalities of the

surrounding St. Louis County. This initiative, which involves the administrative merger of city and county and the subsequent redistribution of wealth via taxes and business relocation, is presented as unequivocally reasonable and fair, a last chance for a city in a shambles. However, Franzen undermines this apparently desirable move from the very beginning. To start with, the operation is to be carried out by a rather improbable outfit, which cannot but weaken the credibility of the novel's commitment to the actual viability of change. Then we learn that the conspirators, former Marxists whose methods are rather iniquitous, actually have spurious objectives: moneymaking by means of a large speculative operation. To make things worse, we are shown that the process is causing great social damage through gentrification and forced relocation of population to a forsaken ghetto. Finally, after a considerable build-up of expectation, the whole enterprise fails because people just cannot be bothered to vote on the referendum on the merger. The plot self-deconstructs, and the novel seems to collapse in what Hawkins has called "an act of novelistic bad faith" (Hawkins 2010: 67). Apathy reigns triumphant and any chances of intervention to change the status quo are rendered futile:

16

America was outgrowing the age of action [...] With a maturity gained by bitter experience, the new America knew that certain struggles would not have the happy endings once dreamed of, but were doomed to perpetuate themselves, metaphorically foiling all attempts to resolve them. No matter how a region was structured, well-to-do white people were never going to permit their children to attend schools with dangerous black children [...] Taxes were bound to hit the unprivileged harder than the privileged [...] The world would either end in nuclear holocaust or else not end in a nuclear holocaust [...] All political platforms were identical in their inadequacy, their inability to alter the cosmic order. (Franzen 2010: 503-4)

This and the accompanying paragraphs have caused dismay in Franzen's critics. Thus, Hawkins deplores that the novel, instead of offering a prospect for change, "extends an olive branch of irony to the reader, who is encouraged to join Franzen in shaking his or her head in mutual understanding of the nation's intractable awfulness" (Hawkins 2010: 70). Similarly, Hutchinson observes of the novel's ending: "Historical forces grind on, crushing all agency and resistance" (Hutchinson 2009: 194), although it rather looks as if it is the *end* of history that actually makes agency futile, as we argue below. For Hutchinson, the novel already shows the dominant political tone in Franzen's novels:

One that both accepts and regrets the apparent draining of all possible resistance, conflict or meaningful difference. "Unideological" in this sense is not the true absence of ideology, but rather a complete surrender to the power of the prevailing ideology. (2009: 193)

And he finally summarizes:

Although the novel's categorical and ethical reversals make it aesthetically pleasing, they compromise Franzen's professed project of writing a social novel that combines aesthetic achievement with progressive engagement, in that the work's subversive intent falls victim to a content that emphasizes capitulation and quietism. (2009: 194)

Hawkins and Hutchinson are representative of a current of academic criticism of Franzen informed by a mixture of hopeful excitement at the possibility of a successful socially engaged novel, raised precisely by Franzen's work (specifically by the success of *The Corrections*); and disappointment at what they regard as a failure in satisfactorily producing such a novel. It is therefore a judgement brought upon Franzen by his own declared social preoccupations. In any case, it is a critique informed by a tacit Lukácsian view of what a socially critical novel should be. Its censorious attitude against Franzen's shortcomings powerfully recalls the Hungarian critic's disparagement of Modernism. For Lukács, the ideology of Modernism "asserts the unalterability of outward reality", while "human activity is, a priori, rendered impotent and robbed of meaning" (Lukács 2006: 36). The result for Lukács is *angst*, the basic disposition associated with Modernism. As an example, Lukács mentions the "mood of total impotence, of paralysis in the face of the unintelligible power of circumstances" in Kafka's *The Trial* (2006: 36). This narrow view of course implies an at least questionable denial of critical power to dystopian social descriptions that do not offer effective instances of opposition to the state of affairs, and involves an equally contentious dismissal of any subversive or critical thrust that might lie in the expression of disgust, anxiety or *angst*.

At this point, it seems best to avoid moralizing judgements and try instead to ascertain whatever factors drove Franzen to undermine and ultimately deny the possibility of a change that he obviously regarded as desirable, in an admittedly political novel written with the intention of "bringing news to the mainstream" (Franzen 2002: 95). As Hawkins has noticed, the way in which the novel abruptly denies the possibilities for socio-political change that it has previously evoked is essentially ironic. We hold that this reversal may be seen in turn as determined by the pervading irony that permeates our postmodern culture and which has become a distinctive feature of much postmodern fiction. In her influential *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Linda Hutcheon celebrated the critical power of irony in postmodern art, mostly deployed through parody, which she identified as one of the most distinctive postmodern modes (Hutcheon 1988: 39). However, Hutcheon has later engaged in a more nuanced exploration of the implications and potentialities of irony, one that acknowledges the inescapable pitfalls of its essential

ambivalence. Thus, in *Irony's Edge* (1994), Hutcheon points at the “transideological” nature of irony (1994: 10) which inevitably works to undercut the ironist’s stance. Indeed, it seems clear that if irony does have an obvious subversive potential, it can also work as a powerful deterrent of agency and engagement. As Moretti has put it,

a culture that pays tribute to multiple viewpoints, doubt, and irony, is also, by necessity, a culture of *indecision*. Irony’s most typical feature is its ability to stop time, to question what has already been decided, or to re-examine already finished events in a different light. But it will never suggest what should be done: it can *restrain* action, but not encourage it. (Moretti 2000: 121)

In his essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” (1997), David Foster Wallace traces the origins of postmodernism in the United States back to a rebellion, by means of irony, against the hypocritical myth of America spread by television and advertising. However, Wallace explains, postmodern tools such as irony and self-referentiality were gradually co-opted by TV and have since become agents of despair and political paralysis, in a culture characterized by a weary cynicism:

18

I want to convince you that irony, poker-faced silence, and fear of ridicule are distinctive of those features of contemporary U.S. culture (of which cutting-edge fiction is a part) that enjoy any significant relation to the television whose pretty hand has my generation by the throat. I’m going to argue that irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and that at the same time they are agents of great despair and stasis in U.S. culture, and that for the aspiring fictionist they pose terrifically vexing problems. (Wallace 1997: 171)

As Wallace observes, not only is irony “singularly useless when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks” (183), but it also “tyrannizes us” (183) posing the threat of ridicule over any proposition that presents itself as meaningful. Certainly, shedding one’s shield of irony in a cynical environment renders one vulnerable. In this sense, it is easy to relate the way in which the novel refrains from asserting an effective form of agency—as well as its general low emotional temperature—to that pre-emptive power of irony, and it is equally tempting to suggest that Franzen himself pre-emptively deconstructs the novel in order to avoid charges of political naivety. In his 2002 essay “Mr Difficult”, where he disavows the most self-referential trend in postmodernism, Franzen seems to acknowledge postmodern irony as a sort of defence mechanism:

Indeed the essence of postmodernism is an adolescent fear of getting taken in, an adolescent conviction that all systems are phony. The theory is compelling, but as a way of life it’s a recipe for hate. The child grows enormous but never grows up. (Franzen 2002: 269)

Richard Rorty has also discussed the political implications of irony. For Rorty, irony is an inherently private —as opposed to political— affair, basically useless for progressive action:

There is no reason the ironist cannot be a liberal, but she cannot be a “progressive” and “dynamic” liberal in the sense in which liberal metaphysicians sometimes claim to be. For she cannot offer the same sort of social hope that metaphysicians offer. She cannot claim that adopting her redescription of yourself or your situation makes you better able to conquer the forces which are marshalled against you. (1989: 91)

Finally, irony may also be regarded as a symptom of the impossibility of achieving what Jameson has called “critical distance” in current postmodern culture, of articulating a position of one’s own outside “the massive Being of capital” (1991: 48) from which to criticize it, in a system that furthermore seems to instantly reabsorb and disarm any critical intervention. Irony is then an acknowledgement of the inevitable, ineradicable ideological *infection* that one shares with everyone else.

3. Systemic paralysis and Utopian drives

19

Together with the political ineffectiveness of irony, there’s a quality in the lineage of postmodern fiction in which *The Twenty-Seventh City* seeks to inscribe itself that also works against the assertion of agency. In other words, there seems to be a problem with the chosen form. Jameson has shown how “an already constituted ‘narrative paradigm’ emits an ideological message in its own right without the mediation of authorial intervention” (2002: 73). In “Mr Difficult”, Franzen refers to *The Twenty-Seventh City* as his “own Systems novel of conspiracy and apocalypse”. This quintessentially postmodern genre was defined by Tom LeClair, in his study of DeLillo’s narrative *In the Loop* (1987) as a scientifically informed variety of fiction, strongly influenced by systems theory, distinctively concerned with the workings of “the System”, which is conceived as an intricate network of systems of all kind: economic, ideological, etc. As may be expected in an age obsessed with language, the ultimate model for any system is language itself, which in our post-structuralist era means of course a bottomless play of free-floating signifiers in which the referent is forever out of reach and subject positions are always precarious. This implies the representation of an ultimately incomprehensible society which certainly makes little room for assertions of agency. In Hawkins’ words:

The Twenty-Seventh City is a Systems novel, a text that attempts to expose the workings of the System that is consumer capitalism, even as it reinforces the System’s power by replicating many of its structures without submitting an alternative vision

of human relations. In this way, the System looks all-consuming and inescapable except for those, such as the author himself, who have armed themselves with the theoretical tools capable of naming it and thereby withdrawing from it. (Hawkins 2010: 65)

That theoretical knowledge may allow anyone to “withdraw from the system” is a questionable proposition indeed. However, Hawkins’ remarks on the systems novel are pertinent inasmuch as they point to the fact that, as Jameson has frequently observed, successive advances in the systematization of totality may paradoxically lead to a feeling of impotence before the immense global system of exploitation formed by late capitalism. More specifically, he has called attention to “the dangers of an emergent ‘synchronic’ thought in which change and development are relegated to the marginalized category of the merely ‘diachronic’” (2002: 76). Jameson exemplifies the political implications of such a view with Baudrillard’s suggestion of a “total-system” concept of society which reduces all possibility of resistance to “anarchist gestures, to the sole remaining protests of the wildcat strike, terrorism and death” (2002: 76)³.

20

From a different point of view, Beck has examined the ethical implications of overplaying the concept of system, which for him ultimately amount to the dissolution of responsibility and agency. Thus, in a highly systemized environment, “corresponding to the highly differentiated division of labor, there is a general complicity, and the complicity is matched by a general lack of responsibility. Everyone is cause *and* effect, and thus *non-cause*”. As a consequence, “one acts physically, without acting morally or politically. The generalized other—the system— acts within and through oneself” (Beck 1992: 33). Žižek, for his part, has linked these circumstances to an abandonment of the Hegelian notion of *determinate negation* and the generalization of the “wholly Other” as the utopian prospect of overcoming the global techno-capitalist system. In his words:

The idea is that, with the “dialectic of Enlightenment” which tends towards the zero-point of the totally “administered” society, one can no longer conceptualize breaking out of the deadly spiral of this dialectic by means of the classical Marxist notion according to which the New will emerge from the very contradictions of the present society, through its immanent self-overcoming: the impetus for such an overcoming can only come from an unmediated Outside. (Žižek 2008: 337)

Such perceived deadlock may easily involve a certain feeling of despair which was surely not uncommon in a decade marked in great measure by an escalation of the Cold War (whose approaching end apparently no one seemed able to foresee), while conservative governments in different countries seemed intent on removing all previous legal restraints on capitalism. Significantly, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites, that great historical turn beginning in 1989, paradoxically

only added to the generalized feeling of history coming to a halt which would be sung triumphantly by Fukuyama (1992) and others. An age characterized, in Jameson's words, by an "inverted millenarism" (1991: 1) that predicates the end of politics, art or history itself. In 1988, some twenty years after his *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord sees the process of spectacular transformation of society as having achieved completion in the state of "integrated spectacle", characterized by a complete destruction of history which suggests a closed future:

The society whose modernization has reached the state of the integrated spectacle is characterized by the combined effect of five principal features: incessant technological renewal; integration of state and economy; generalized secrecy, unanswerable lies; an eternal present. (Debord 2002: 11-12)

It seems likely that Debord would have received criticism similar to that levelled at Franzen by critics such as Hawkins, Hutchinson or Annesley, as *The Twenty-Seventh City* obviously chimes in with such depressing pictures. Perhaps, however, it is time now to complicate the picture of the novel's disavowal of its own investment in the perspective of radical political change, by recalling the fact that it is not only the postmodern genre of the Systems novel that is characterized as conceiving of the state of affairs as being basically unchangeable: the realist novel too is characterized by a distinctive kind of inherent conservatism which Jameson has described as an "ontological commitment to the status quo as such" (Jameson 2013: 145). For Jameson,

realism requires a conviction as to the massive weight and persistence of the present as such, and an aesthetic need to avoid recognition of deep structural social change as such and of the deeper currents and contradictory tendencies within the social order. To posit the imminence of some thoroughgoing revolution in the social order itself is at once to disqualify those materials of the present which are the building blocks of narrative realism. (Jameson 2013: 145)

From this point of view, the novel's final vision of social stasis would be in keeping with its realist affiliation, and yet one cannot discount its postmodern drive to provide a mimetic account of a postmodern society. Another important aspect that the critics mentioned above seem to overlook in their account of Franzen's novel is that, as Jameson has consistently argued, although our impoverished sense of history may atrophy our Utopian imagination (our ability to envision future alternatives to the present), Utopian drives will inevitably find their way consciously or not into every future-oriented project, and most likely in disguise. For Jameson (1994: 56), the Utopian text is usually non-narrative and "somehow without a subject position". And what is more, there is always something to be learned from the failure of Utopian thought, from the flaws and elusions of Utopian vision, since they may negatively define the limits of our imagination and representation

abilities, our capacity to map the totality, as they are shaped by the present state of affairs. In Jameson's words, "the best Utopias are those that fail the most comprehensively", and therefore make us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment (Jameson 2007: xiii).

Thus, even the corrupt, failed conspiracy of Jammu and her followers furnishes a flickering image of the possibility of public officials acting as revolutionary leaders determinedly taking effective action in favour of the needy, deftly reversing the (generally regarded as irresistible) forces of capitalism, successfully fighting them with their own (financial) weapons. This is a prospect which would hardly have been acceptable in the novel, but rather would have been dismissed as wish-fulfilment, had it been textually dramatized *in good faith*. We could argue, following Jameson, that in *The Twenty-Seventh City* "the Utopian impulse has come as close to reality as it can without turning into a conscious Utopian project" (2007: 8). To this Utopian charge, furthermore, we may add the implicit communitarian element that, according to Paula Martín, can be found in the *topos* of conspiracy (Martín Salván 2013: 225).

22

At this point, readers of the novel are likely to be wondering why a text so ostensibly concerned with the workings of the system can dedicate so many of its most brilliant pages to a splendid dramatization of the problems of communication and disenchantment of a white upper-class family who live in Webster Groves. In his seminal *The Political Unconscious* (1981), Jameson declares that all narrative acts are symbolic acts which address an unsolvable social contradiction. It would be logical to add that they also seek to symbolically mend their author's ideological and psychological contradictions. Then it would make sense to ask what the novel is trying to do for its author with its "swashbuckling, Pynchon-sized megaplot" (in Antrim 2001). To which question it could be answered that what the novel is trying to compensate for is the fact that it is a novel about a white upper-class family who live in Webster Groves (and written to boot by a white middle-class writer who happened to grow up in Webster Groves). Previously we alluded to the difficulties inherent to the form chosen by Franzen for his novel, when it comes to articulating positions of resistance and effective agency. It is interesting, however, to inquire as to the narrative choices available to Franzen or, to put it another way, what is it that makes the postmodern Systems novel the genre of choice for American straight white male novelists with social concerns. The answer is likely to be found in the current compartmentalization of an identity-based literary scene which hinges around the margins. Those same margins, by the way, which according to Franzen form the last vestiges of vitality in "the inner city" of American fiction (Franzen 2002: 62).

4. Nostalgias of the industrial age

In any case, there is in *The Twenty-Seventh City* an undeniable vindication of the middle class that transpires in its characterization of the Probsts, something which has become recurrent in Franzen's fiction. Any objections as to Martin Probst's class affiliation in view of his (self-assigned) hefty income of \$190,000 a year should be dismissed as a droll example of his funny little middle-class ways. Probst is after all a self-made man, at only one generational remove from actual poverty, a firm believer in hands-on work with a built-in abhorrence of speculative operations possibly inherited from parental experiences previous to the Depression. But, as Jameson reminds us following Bakhtin, class discourse is essentially dialogical in structure and mostly antagonistic, so that "the individual utterance or text is grasped as a symbolic move in an essentially polemic and strategic confrontation between the classes" (2002: 70-1). The antagonistic class in *The Twenty-Seventh-City* is certainly an oligarchic upper-class represented by genuinely rich, conspiring characters whose aristocratic debauchery, as in the case of Probst's brother-in-law Rolf Ripley, or whose politically reactionary stand, as in the case of Colonel Norris, contrast vividly with Probst's paternalist entrepreneurship and the *probity* which his name suggests.

23

Probst, the builder of the Arch, stands, like Alfred Lambert in *The Corrections*, or Walt Kowalski, Clint Eastwood's character in *Grand Torino* (2008), for a classic tradition of American productiveness, of proud, solid hands-on work which has all but vanished before the intangibility of modern financial industry. In this sense, the symbolical identification drawn by the novel between Probst and the city is apt enough, as both seem destined to irrelevance and decay in the elusive, speculative times of what Bauman (2000) has described as liquid modernity or light capitalism. It is surely not hard to perceive a certain authorial identification with Probst, which can also be interpreted as an expression of nostalgia for American industrial society, in the sense that Beck has given to the term. Franzen thus seems to feel that the latter, in a way the golden age of the American middle class, was more promising community-wise than the subsequent phase of late capitalism in spite of the inescapable ideological and environmental contradictions it entailed, and which the novel also shows. Indeed, in this respect there seems to be an irreparable ambivalence in Franzen's stance. There is a nostalgic yearning for a time in which American inner cities thrived and harboured vibrant communities, together with an idealized vision of the city as the agora-like actual site of what Habermas described as the public sphere. To this we may add that in *Strong Motion* and *The Corrections* public utilities and industrial infrastructure become symbols of a planned, collective vision with obvious communitarian implications. However, Franzen is also aware that industrial

society, the classic urban model, was no less dependent on social inequality than the present times are: the ghetto of East St. Louis was not created by Jammu—it was already there for her to fill with the human refuse of gentrification. In the same way, the novelist reflects that it is that same industrial society, or heavy modernity, in Bauman's expression, that initiated the unending expansion that has led to what Jameson describes as the abolition of Nature and the disappearance of the outside: it is Probst himself, after all, who has covered enormous expanses of former woodland with concrete as part of the relentless suburban expansion. Bauman has referred to the era Franzen seems to idealize in the following oppressive terms:

That part of history, now coming to its close, could be dubbed, for the lack of a better term, the era of *hardware*, or heavy modernity [...] the epoch of weighty and ever more cumbersome machines, of the ever longer factory walls enclosing ever wider factory floors and ingesting ever more populous factory crews [...] To conquer space was the supreme goal—to grasp as much of it as one could hold, and to hold to it, marking it all over with the tangible tokens of possession and 'No trespassing' boards. (Bauman 2000: 113-4)

24

It turns out then that the seeds of what is lamented today lay within the past one idealizes. We may notice a similar circumstance in *The Corrections*: when Franzen sets the solid, productive world of Alfred and Enid Lambert's youth against the evanescence of life under contemporary late capitalism as experienced by their offspring, it becomes apparent that the latter world is nothing but the product of the former. Franzen's nostalgias are then irremediably conflict-ridden. Ultimately, what is highlighted is just the obvious point that postmodernity was contained in modernity. Last but not least, there is the unavoidable fact that Probst's paternalism is inseparable from the patriarchal character of industrial society. As Beck argues, industrial society is based upon a specific distribution of gender roles which, insofar as they are ascribed to the individual by birth, confers upon him or her a certain feudal character. For Beck, this distribution of roles between the sexes is "both the *product* and the *foundation* of the industrial system, in the sense that wage labor *presupposes* housework, and that the spheres and forms of production and the family are separated and *created* in the nineteenth century" (Beck 1992: 106). Needless to say, this separation of the spheres of production and family involves male ascendancy. This configuration of roles and the distinct kind of antagonism between the sexes that it causes is visible in the Probst family. For Martin Probst, home is the haven of well-earned tranquillity where he can retire each day, always in command, after the exertions of an exhausting but comfortingly structured, reassuring world of work where a man can find "the consolations of pure activity, pure work, the advancement of physical and organizational order" (Franzen 2010: 461). Not incidentally, if for

Bauman classic modernity —a concept comparable to Beck’s industrial society— was the era of hardware, here we see how Probst embodies such modernity by visualizing himself as machinery:

Of course, he could also see that for thirty years he’d worked too hard, could see himself in hindsight as a monstrosity with arms and hands the size of Volkswagens, legs folded like the treads of a bulldozer [...] He’d failed as a father and a husband. But if anyone had ever tried to tell him this he would have shouted them down, since the love he felt for Barbara and Louisa at the office had never waned. (2010: 461)

In his longings, however, Probst seems again as outdated as the city itself. As Beck explains, reflexive modernity and its dynamic of individuation do not stop “at the gates of the family, marriage, parenthood and housework” (1992: 106). Individuals are liberated from traditional forms as well as from ascribed roles “in the search for ‘a life of their own’” (1992: 105). Thus, he ends up in baffled estrangement from his wife and daughter, who flee from the suffocating positions allocated to them in the realm of the family.

5. Unhappy endings, or, the persistence of realism

25

In Jameson’s theory, the conditions of possibility for realist or modernist praxis are historically determined, and thus are not equally accessible to writers of different socio-historical circumstances. Similarly, certain forms of political and ideological resistance seem not to be readily available to Franzen, as resistance against the mainstream is always best deployed from the margins, which is especially true in a postmodern theoretical environment that tends to focus on the “ex-centric” (see Hutcheon 1988: 59). Realism, that time-honoured way of investigating reality (and thus backing agency) is another not easily accessible (not to say disreputable) tool for a novelist living in postmodern times. It is not just a question of “Po-Mo machinery”, it is that realism is certainly incompatible with a world-view informed by the notion that history has come to an end. Indeed, within that paradigm a Systems novel would be more mimetic. Without a sense of history there can be no “perspective”, a notion which for Lukács implied not only a social point of view but also a vision of evolutionary unfolding in history. Obviously, certain key elements of classic realism are here absent: Lukács’ class consciousness has fallen prey to social entropy; and Auerbach’s “social forces” pale confronted with the overriding, hegemonic force of capital. And what Balzac, for example, inevitably perceived as a merely contingent arrangement of the status quo, a temporary state in the flow of history, seems quite naturally to Franzen to be an unassailable “system”; not the least because, if “our imaginations are hostages to our own mode of production” (Jameson 2007: xiii), Balzac’s contemporaneity with more

than one of such modes is very different from our own total immersion in liquid modernity, to use Bauman's term.

That being said, it is evident, however, that Franzen strives for historicity: he investigates the city's past, traces Martin Probst's background to Dust Bowl Oklahoma and even provides a substantial account of the personal background of the Indian plotters. There actually is a clear microcosmic quality to *The Twenty-Seventh City*, in that the socio-political and economic workings of St. Louis are intended to be representative of those of the nation and indeed the wider world of Western capitalism, much in the same way as Baltimore is presented in David Simon's series *The Wire* (2002-2008), another fictional artefact which relies on wiretapping both as a framing narrative device and as a way to show a certain perspective on social totality. Nevertheless, Franzen's attempt falls short of a Lukácsian synthesis in which characters are both individual and representative of the most significant features of a historical period. Furthermore, although we learn about the overall dynamics of St. Louis' economy and we are informed of the unfairness of its social consequences, the actual narrative focus is as unevenly distributed as the city's wealth. It is not necessary, for example, to compare *The Twenty-Seventh City* to Eliot's *Middlemarch* to notice that, apart from the police chief, only one of the characters actually lives in the very city that is the concern of the novel, namely RC White, the only significant black character in a novel about a mostly black city. He forms the only counterpoint to the wealthy suburbanites and conspirators who constitute the dramatis personae of the novel. Albeit in somewhat tepid scenes, we follow White through the novel, from his employment in menial jobs to his appointment as a police officer, and even witness his ouster from his house due to triumphant gentrification. This is something that tells *The Twenty-Seventh City* apart from the rest of Franzen's novels: we will not find a similar case of sustained concern with the fate of a lower or working-class character in Franzen's subsequent fiction, in which the perspective is exclusively upper-middle class. But there is yet another important circumstance related to realism that is exclusive to *The Twenty-Seventh City* within the whole of Franzen's novelistic production, namely the virtual absence of rhetorical strategies and proairetic schemata derived from genres such as *Bildungsroman*, romance or melodrama to soften the hard edge of realism or symbolically make up for irreconcilable social contradictions, as is increasingly the case in Franzen's subsequent novels. In *The Twenty-Seventh City* there are no individual perspectives of salvation, and no comforting retreat to the more manageable, small communities of family and lovers to compensate for the intractability of the system and the decomposition of the public sphere. On the contrary, the novel's central family, the Probsts, are as beset by disintegration as the city they inhabit, and their house ends up burnt to the ground. The end of the novel is marked not only by the failure of Jammu's

plan to merge the county and the city due to prevailing apathy and resistance to change, but also by Barbara Probst's absurd death, Jammu's suicide, and Martin Probst's bewilderment at such a display of contingency. These grim circumstances, which powerfully contrast with the Austen-like type of epilogue that the rest of Franzen's novels end with, suggest a kind of hard core of realism in *The Twenty-Seventh City* which is diluted in Franzen's subsequent work. As Eagleton has put it, "[y]ou cannot marry everyone happily off in the last ten pages and claim that this is how life is" (Eagleton 2003). Moretti has also identified unhappy endings as a distinctive feature of realism:

The identification of real and rational, of legality and legitimacy, so characteristic of the classical *Bildungsroman* and of Hegel's philosophy of history, has fallen apart. Reality's essence lies not in embodying a society's professed values, but in its violent rejection and open derision of anyone who tries to realize them.

This is why realistic narrative does not tolerate happy endings: these portray the harmony of values and events, while the new image of reality is based on their division. There must be no justice in this world: a realistic story must be *meaningless*, 'signifying nothing'. Even though it comes at the end, the unhappy ending proves here to be the rhetorico-ideological *foundation* of nineteenth-century realism: narrative verisimilitude itself is initially sacrificed by the compelling *need* of these novels to finish unhappily. (Moretti 2000: 120)

27

In a way, this takes us to where we started, to that striking tension between two novelistic paradigms, the postmodern and the realist, coinciding within the same novel. The first one is embodied in the chosen topic and form: the workings of late capitalism are explored by the typically postmodern subgenre of the Systems novel. To the influence of that paradigm we can also ascribe the use of a conspiracy as a fundamental narrative resource. This is also the case of the pervading irony, an irony which we can describe as *structural*, since it may be perceived across different dimensions of the novel, such as the detached narrative voice, the tricky plot itself and its perplexing conclusion. At times, we can perceive as well a certain affinity with the linguistic experimentalism of the likes of William Gaddis and John Barth. Not least of all, there is an evident influence of post-structuralist theory — a cornerstone for much postmodernist fiction, probably the narrative mode most clearly informed by critical theory— such as that of Derrida or Althusser. Not incidentally, a rejection of critical theory eventually played a part in the strident politico-literary disavowals Franzen carefully staged. In any case, set against this stance of postmodern influence we find a decidedly referential impulse and — crucially— an explanatory vocation which is a sure mark of high realism. This is apparent in Franzen's interest in showing the mechanisms of different spheres of political and economic power in a St. Louis which is representative of many other American and Western cities. But perhaps Franzen's referential intention is

nowhere more evident than in the topographic quality of the novel, realized in abundant locale description and reinforced by the inclusion of an actual map of St. Louis and its vicinity. With this the novelist honours a central aspect of the realist tradition which is, as Peter Brooks (2003: 2-3) has argued, the attempt to recreate a typically urban world perceived as actually existing in a synthetic, small-scale model-like way, in order to analyse it and thus make better sense of it. This takes Franzen's first novel close to what McLaughlin posits as "the agenda of post-postmodernism" (2004: 67): the production of a socially engaged fiction that is theory-aware enough to lay bare the language-based nature of many oppressive constructions, thus opening our eyes to the fact that other realities are possible. Be that as it may, the aforementioned strain between two different approaches to narrative that characterizes *The Twenty-Seventh City* will decrease visibly in Franzen's following novels. Certainly, it is noticeable enough in *Strong Motion*, but at the end of that novel Franzen introduces the crucial salvational elements around which he articulates a metanarrative, that of his own literary *conversion*, by means of which he justifies his politico-literary evolution through the vicissitudes of his characters. None of this is present here, but this does not mean that the novel is unrelated to Franzen's subsequent turn. As Franzen argues in the *Harper's* essay (1996), it was precisely his writing this kind of fiction that was a factor in the depression he underwent in the early 1990s, which in Franzen's metanarrative will constitute a fundamental source of justification for his act of political and literary recantation.

28

Notes

1. It is surely this duality within that has led critics such as Ribbat (2002) or McLaughlin (2004) to ascribe Franzen to what they perceive as a new literary trend which they present as "post-postmodernism". This is also the case of Burn (2008), the author of the only monograph on Franzen to date. In his study (more concerned with generic and stylistic aspects than with political analysis), Burn uses the term post-postmodernist to characterize Franzen's fiction as well as that of David Foster Wallace and Richard Powers. It may be argued, however, that none of these critics successfully articulates a notion of post-postmodernism that enables one to tell it apart from different nuances of what is

usually known as postmodernism. In this sense, Parrish has dismissed Burn's case for that concept since in his opinion "nearly all of the qualities he identifies as post-postmodernist are exactly what Hutcheon and Jameson describe as postmodernist" (Parrish 2010: 651), and has also observed that Burn's attempt "only underscores the degree to which these writers remain postmodernist and arguably belated in relation to Gaddis, Pynchon and DeLillo" (Parrish 2010: 652).

2. "Knowable Communities" is the title of Williams' fundamental essay on George Eliot's fiction, included in *The Country and the City* (1973).

³. The perception of the political import of post-structuralism is thus a matter of controversy within the Left itself. We may remember, however, that Badiou has vehemently contended that the demystifying work of Lacan, Foucault or Althusser constitutes a fundamental advance for emancipatory politics (Badiou 2001: 4-7). In a similar way, Laclau has argued that as a result of the work of thinkers such as Derrida the metaphysical discourse of the West is coming to an end, opening thus the way for new and radical political possibilities (Laclau 2007: 123). Similarly, theorists such as Callinicos deny incompatibility between the determining power of structures and the assertion of agency. For him, structures may be seen as limits that curtail the individual's range of action or that which precisely enables such action. This is the case of what the Marxist

tradition regards as the most important single social structure, namely the relations of production. In this sense, Callinicos (2004) sees those relations as constituting relations of power over individuals and productive forces. For Callinicos, this conceptual position

accords causal powers to structures without falling into the kind of Althusserian structural determinism that treats individuals as the 'supports' of the relations of production. It can therefore accommodate the rational-choice Marxists' demand that social explanations have 'microfoundations'—that is, that they show how the existence of social mechanisms and structural tendencies depends on the incentives and interests they give individual actors. (Callinicos 2004: 22)

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29

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