

*ARCHITECTURAL SYMBOLISM AS INTERSEMIOTIC TRANSLATION:
MALCOLM BRADBURY'S THE HISTORY MAN*

*SIMBOLISMO ARQUITETÔNICO COMO TRADUÇÃO INTERSEMIÓTICA:
THE HISTORY MAN DE MALCOLM BRADBURY*



Felix Nicolau¹
Associate Professor
The Technical University of Civil Engineering, Bucharest, Romania
hamsun10@yahoo.com

Abstract: *Campus novels describe isolated, almost autarchic utopias. In Malcolm Bradbury's The History Man, this utopia is projected into a dystopian dimension by a functional and transparent architecture. The epoch is that of radical sociologists who fight against tradition, memory, privacy, and subtlety. The paper analyses the influence architecture can have on people's minds and behaviours, or the damages inflicted by concrete-and-steel structures upon human configuration. This is a study about the excesses of structure.*

Keywords: *architecture, intersemiotic translation, radicalism, sociology, structure.*

121

Resumo: Os romances de Campus (*campus novels*) descrevem utopias isoladas e quase autárquicas. Em *The History Man*, de Malcolm Bradbury, essa utopia é projetada para uma dimensão distópica, por meio de uma arquitetura funcional e transparente. A época é a de sociólogos radicais que lutam contra a tradição, a memória, a privacidade e a sutileza. O artigo analisa a influência que a arquitetura pode ter na mente e no comportamento das pessoas, ou os danos causados por estruturas de concreto e aço sobre a configuração humana. Este é um estudo sobre os excessos de estrutura.

Palavras-chave: arquitetura; estrutura; radicalismo; sociologia; tradução intersemiótica.

1. Introduction

In spite of the excessive specialization in the 1970s, with a concentration on sociological studies, the contemporary interpretation of Malcom Bradbury's *The History Man* (1975) allows for an interdisciplinary approach using the methods and concepts of cultural studies. The obsession with history in the novel is made obvious not only by shooting political riots and radical attitudes during academic meetings, but also by laying heavy emphasis on the architectural innovations. Architecture refers especially to the new buildings of Watermouth University, but it comprises the inner structure of some characters, too. Consequently, my paper will discuss the structural implications of routinely fulfilled tasks or deeds of those characters coming into contact with the momentum of Sex Revolution in the U.K., as this is

reflected in the novel. The reflection of the system of signs belonging to archaeology, on one hand, and to sociology, on the other, is transfer specific to intersemiotic translations.

2. The Dominant Code

Transparent architecture symbolizes the formal equivalence resorted to in the translation of official texts. The content matters very little compared to the ritualized form. Jop Kaakinen's geometrical vision functions as a two-way intersemiotic translation: sociological postulates are reflected in the simplified and corporatist architecture of the new university. Accordingly, the sociologists get intimidated by and show aggression towards the intimate and embellished genre of architecture specific to the Faculty of Humanities. Transparency affects both sides, architectural and translational, adding to the proliferation of signs void of material content. There would be two types of such signs: "Either they have a primarily content and are post-industrial or informational goods. Or they have an aesthetic content and are what can be termed postmodern goods." (LASH; URRY, 1994, p. 4)

122

People live up to their fashionable credos. Barbara Kirk's characterization of the parties she and her husband use the throw can be extended to the general profile of the epoch: "An accidental party, the kind where you might meet anyone and do anything [...] or meet anything and do anyone" (BRADBURY, 2000, p. 8). All these gatherings are characterized by architectureless, amorphous situations. But it is not this aspect that defines them, because they are casual relaxations. What matters in the 1970s is structure, or, better, imposing patterns of thinking and behaviour. Such an approach contradicts Stuart Hall's delimitation of the concept of *identity*, which "does not signal [the] stable core of the self [...] without change [...] Identities are never unified [...] never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions [...] are constantly in the process of change and transformation [...] identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation" (HALL, 1996, p. 3-4).

In the interval dominated by sociology we have exactly the opposite understanding of identity. The *History Man* is Professor Howard Kirk who despises bourgeoisie and expects radical attitudes from his students. His life summons contradictory aspects: he comes from the lower-middle-class, wherein education was a springboard toward upper-middle-class, he marries and have kids at the expense of his wife, Barbara, who has to interrupt her academic career, then he changes university, descending southwards, to the Watermouth University (the

name being suggestive for the well-being of its employees) and there meets an ex-colleague, Henry Beamish, with his wife Myra. Howard disapproves of their cosy life style and chooses to refurbish a house populated, until then, by squatters. Once settled, he develops his theories about open-marriage and the historical necessity of giving up tradition, which is considered hypocrite and selfish. The Kirks are famous “not to have such things as customs and traditions” (BRADBURY, 2000, p. 2). So they want to live in their day and age. Howard lectures on Revolutions and grows a moustache à la Fidel Castro. His radicalism targets privacy, that is why he writes *The Defeat of Privacy*, where he theorizes sociability and the “parameters of the encounter” (*ibidem*: 6). Their parties, although apparently completely impromptu, are carefully planned beforehand: they map the rooms and despatch the persons who are supposed to interact and, most often than not, have intercourse (that is why the rooms are dimly lit and some of them provided with mattresses).

Malcom Bradbury wrote his novel in 1975, a little after the fireworks of the Sexual Revolution and the drugs-stimulated anarchism of the 1960s and early 1970s. He critically considers every step the History Man – the man of the moment – takes. For instance, in the Kirks’ household there is all the time a girl-student taking care of the two kids. Generally, they succumb to Howard’s rhetorical charisma and sleep with him, as it is the case with the exalted Felicity Phee. The author resorts to the onomastics as well, to offer hints about the characters’ frailties or qualities.

123

3. Globalized Translation. Fashions

Bradbury strives to remain on a neutral ground, but it is obvious right from the beginning that he is in a biting mood towards the radicals’ hysteria and their self-deceit in pretending to be democrats while they make use of power whenever they are in the position to do so. This happens even in the radicals’ families: “your idea of a good party is to invite the universe. And then leave me to wash up after!” (BRADBURY, 2000, p. 7), Barbara Kirk accuses. If we take a short stroll along the best-known campus novels in UK we remark that David Lodge’s professors happily and promiscuously indulge the perks of their professions. The justification for their expensive research style is that they represent the postmodern facet of the Arthurian Knights of the Round Table. Their pretensions, pitted against their hedonism and careerism, are the source of comic in his novels. Martin Amis’s *Lucky Jim* mocks the affectations and the bombastic language of the faculty staff. Miles away from these humorous intentions,

Bradbury studies the process of twisting ideas into ideologies. The relationships, too, are built upon power scaffolding, even if they are wrapped up in democratic rituals. Howard, for instance, consumes people with the pretext of setting them free.

Barbara: “You’ve had all the people you can eat! We need some fresh ones, says Howard.” (BRADBURY, 2000, p. 8)

Barbara: “How this heart bleeds for victims. And he finds them all over. The only ones he can’t see are the people he victimizes himself.” (BRADBURY, 2000, p. 10)

Another accusation brought to her husband is that he changes with the fashion, careful not to miss the leading role in the special play. In complete distinction of David Lodge’s and Martin Amis’s mediocre professors (only some of them), Bradbury’s personages suffer not from professional mediocrity, but from emotional and relational handicaps. What they follow is a globalization of community in conformity with their rules. The implications of globalization for identity are many: “Globalization [...] produces different outcomes for identity. The cultural homogeneity promoted by global marketing could lead to the detachment of identity from community and place” (WOODWARD, 1997, p. 16).

124

4. Architectures of Message: Inner and Outer Perspectives

The process of corrupting identity is insidiously accelerated with the help of architecture. The modernist context created by the Finnish Jop Kaakinen clearly indicates the differences between sciences. The distinction between the old, decorated and cosy buildings of the university and the new, *purified*, glass-and-steel ones is made with the occasion of Howard’s employment interview. He is received in the panelled Gaitskell Room of the Elizabethan hall which had been the ‘original starting place of the new university, before the towers and the pre-stressed concrete and the glass-framed buildings that were now beginning to spread across the site.’ (BRADBURY, 2000, p. 37)

The architectural differences between old and new buildings regard style, shape, materials, and functionality. Sociology studies are the stars of the moment, as people are more interested now in building relationships and increasing their sway on others’ minds than in interpreting texts or finding hidden meanings. Propaganda and political upheaval eclipse

hermeneutics and arts. The insurgent spirit of sociology is backed up by the explosive dynamism of technique and new management approaches. There is only a small stake left to humanities. The mechanization of purposes is internalized in the narration through the use of alliterations, repetitions, and parallelisms. The pages of the novel appear as a block, without relaxation or graceful indentations. Jop Kaakinen's programme: *Creating a Community/Building a Dialogue* enrolls personal options into a wholesale march enflamed by Marxist- Freudian views.

Because Henry and Myra Beamish settled "outside Watermouth, in an architect-converted farmhouse, where they were deep into a world of Tolstoyan pastoral, scything grass and raising organic onions" (BRADBURY, 2000, p. 41), they would be condemned as bourgeois. The Beamishes and the Kirks changed Leeds for Watermouth, the former being a working class environment, while the latter was "built on tourism, property, retirement pensions, French chefs." (BRADBURY, 2000, p. 41) Education did not transform Howard's mentality: he still belongs in the slums. Not only is he against luxury, but he fights whatever tranquil way of living. That is why he contributes to the dismemberment of the Beamish couple. Howard develops a "hermeneutic of suspicion" (RICOEUR, 1981, p 6-7; 34), without manifesting an intellectual irony towards "final vocabularies." (RORTY, 1989, p. 73)

125

Without realizing, many faculty members and students skid from ideas to ideology, thus suffocating dialogues or polemics. Henry Beamish tries to bring arguments in favour of his decent and traditional life: "I'm not wild about all this violent radical zeal that's about now, all these explosive bursts of demand. They taste of a fashion. Punch a policeman this year. And I can't see what's wrong with a bit of separateness and withdrawal from the fray." (BRADBURY, 2000, p. 43) Howard's response is non-argumentative and inquisitorial: "Oh, Christ, evasive quietism." (BRADBURY, 2000, p. 43) Such a fashionable anarchism enforces regulations and prescribed mentalities without proposing structures. They are not able to deconstruct, as they do not accept a dialogic formula. A structure is a constructive geometry, not only supportive scaffolding. That is why structures imply complexity and even variation. A structure could not be dictatorial without going bankrupt.

5. Dictatorship or Plurivocity in Decoding Messages?

How structural are Kaakinen's new university buildings? Robert A. Morace considers that the modernist looking university is managed like a factory. He defines Watermouth University as

being less a university than a factory “where everyone must conform to the rule of non-conformity.” (MORACE, 1989, p. 71) Here all the rooms are repetitiously alike and “in such an aggressively and architecturally modern environment conservatives [...] appear not merely freakish but psychologically deviant.” (MORACE, 1989, p. 71)

Malcolm Bradbury’s attacks on Sociology and the related fields are motivated by the limitations imposed on thinking. In Watermouth’s sociological seminars students are supposed to think, write and act in line with their professors’ preferences. Howard is irritated by Carmody’s meticulousness and lack of radicalism, the dialogue between them, after the reading of an essay, being a sample of non-argumentative polemics.

Howard: “this Anglo-Catholic classicist royalist stuff you import from English and want to call sociology?” Carmody: “It’s an accepted form of cultural analysis”
Howard: “I don’t accept it. It’s an arty-farty construct that isn’t Sociology, because it happens to exclude everything that makes up the real face of society.” (MORACE, 1989, p. 147)

126

Howard justifies the low grades of Carmody using slogans: “He’s a juvenile fascist. He’s both incapable and dishonest.” (MORACE, 1989, p. 152)

As we can see, between the Sociology Department and the English Department there is a mutual intellectual distrust. Especially the sociologists are vehement in accusing the humanists of futility, lack of scientific method and nostalgic approaches. The epitomes of these two confrontational stances are Howard and Miss Callender. Howard’s seduction of the reclusive and independent Miss Callender at the end of the novel functions as a twisting *deus ex machina* and symbolizes the submissive role reserved to arts in postmodernity.

The contentious items between the two Departments are reflected in the architecture and decoration of the buildings that shelter them. It is like a display of forces between Apollo and Dionysus: “now the campus is massive, one of those dominant modern environments of multifunctionality that modern man creates: close it down as a university [...] and you could open it again as a factory, a prison, a shopping precinct” (MORACE, 1989, p. 69). This multi-purpose architectural vision is the equivalent of a novel cleansed of every local flavour. There is no peculiar point of reference and the novel can be translated using formal and functional equivalences without any obstacle. Randall Stevenson noticed that *The History Man* is written especially in the present tense (STEVENSON, 1976, p. 191) and that there is an antithesis in the title. History is reduced to present and the history man is actually an opportunist, as his

wife remarks: “Howard’s books are very empty but they’re always on the right side” (BRADBURY, 2000, p. 78).

6. Transparent Translations against Personalized Ones

We must admit that opportunism is a form of attention “liberated” of any defined reticence. The opportunist is a person who annihilates his/her message or distorts it in order to endorse somebody else’s message, irrespective of its toxicity. This abdication from personality is reflected by means of intersemiotic translation in the all-purpose university architecture. The Durkheim Room in the Social Science Building is a neutralized space for the meetings, where the sociologists fiercely debate over their contentious items:

It is a long, thin chamber preserved only for conference purposes; as a result, a certain dignity, a spacious seriousness, has been attempted. On two sides there are long glass windows, giving onto the distractingly good views; to prevent these being distracting, white slatted Venetian blinds have been hung [...]. The other two walls are pure and white and undecorated, conceived by a nakedly frantic sensibility, open a large, obsessive hole into inner chaos. [...] on the floor is a serious, undistracting brown carpet; on the ceiling, an elaborate acoustical muffle. (BRADBURY, 2000, p. 164)

127

This *undistracting* decoration serves as a stimulus for some ludicrous or extremist proposals and polemics. The staff want to obtain a grant for research into senile delinquency (BRADBURY, 2000, p. 174) and Dr. Zachery contemplates the efficiency of fascism: “an elegant sociological construct, a one-system world—its opposite is contingency or pluralism or liberalism. That means a chaos of opinion and ideology” (BRADBURY, 2000, p. 170).

Bureaucracy needs a protestant type of architecture with as little decoration as possible. Austerity is the concept applicable only to arts, while for morals it is sparingly valued. Howard implements radicalism in his life in a way, while Bradbury translates it, using architectural reflections, in a different way. As D.J. Taylor underlines: “*The History Man*’s overriding theme is the ability of extreme liberalism to degenerate into totalitarianism—a disease of society” (TAYLOR, 1993, p. 210). For instance, in spite of the modern, interactive methods of teaching practised at Watermouth University, the enclosed, artificially lit precincts wherein the courses are held point to a deficient intellectual process. The analogy to the platonic myth of the underground cave is easily discernable. Howard teaches in “an interior room without windows, lit by artificial light.” (BRADBURY, 2000, p. 136) The rooms reflect the exterior of the whole project: “the shuttered concrete of Kaakinen’s inspiration, which in

its pure whiteness is intended to induce the sense of unadulterated form, and hence belongs really in some distant, utopian landscape of sun and shadow, in New Mexico, perhaps” (BRADBURY, 2000, p. 125). There is no connection between the architectural code of the university and the urban architectural code. The predominant colour of the city is dirty grey. This discordance indicates that the academic environment is a cotton-like shelter, unable to improve the surrounding dystopian world. The atmosphere inside is artificial, bunker-like, autarchic and indifferent to the problems of real world: “The pink sodium lights of Watermouth shine in through its glass roof; this is now the only illumination” (BRADBURY, 2000, p. 93). Recesses and niches are not tolerated—everything has to be visualized and public, pretty much like blunt translation relying on functional equivalence: “There are buildings in the world which have corners, bends, recesses; Where seats have been put, or paintings hung on the walls; Kaakinen, in his purity, has rejected all these delicacies” (BRADBURY, 2000, p. 64). Even the offices are all the same: “stark, simple, repetitious, each one an exemplary instance of all the others” (BRADBURY, 2000, p. 66). The only professor who wants to *domesticate* this chilly, outright inhuman perspective is Henry Beamish. He brings into his office some decorative objects from home.

7. Deterritorialization as Abstraction and Geometry

Abstraction is present everywhere, details giving in to inexpressive, depersonalized wholes. As the author remarks, the era of the crowd and the factory arrived and “Gemeinschaft yielded to Gesellschaft. Community was replaced by the fleeting passing contacts of city life” (BRADBURY, 2000, p. 68). The wholeness of urban centres is specific only to academic precincts. Faculty seem to be the future corporatists in that they inhabit ghost-spaces and obstruct more relaxed opinions on life. Their anarchic-communist attitude is supported by an environment without memory or destiny. Reminisces of the glorious past are geometrized:

There are big, bare windows; beyond the windows you can see, dead centre, the high phallus, eolipic in shape, of the boilerhouse chimney, the absolute focus, the point of maximum architectural eminence of the entire university, its substitute for a tower or a spire a campanile. (BRADBURY, 2000, p. 66)

If in David Lodge’s *Changing Places* and *Small World* the fake campaniles attached to the university buildings were kitschified through the use of under—or overestimated materials, in *The History Man* the effect of comparing a boilerhouse chimney with a medieval campanile is

ludicrous and degrading. The architect observed none of the laws of creativity; he simply pilfered previous styles of their details and used cold and transparent materials of construction. This is Bradbury's suggestion when he studies the effects on sociologists' behaviour and thinking. We could as well take the opposite stance and underline the modernist principle of creativity:

To value creativity is to value less the particular products of creation than creative activity itself. If the good is the activity rather than its final products, then the creator should have no qualm leaving them behind, inasmuch as they mark the end of particular spells of creative activity. (LEITER; SINHABABU, 2007, p. 49)

8. Conclusion

Irrespective of the stance we take, *The History Man* has resisted time corrosion owing to its ability to conjugate architectural purity with ideological convulsions. Fact is abstraction cannot become as metaphysical as to escape biased reasoning. More than this, architecture as structure restructures human substance. Exaggerated careerist involvements simply boost the sway of environment by rendering sparser the contact with inner strata of personality. The transparent architecture highlights a dim, incomprehensible human structure. The incomprehensibility of one range of signs may be untranslatable, but it can be reflected by a different category of signs. I would call this possibility the mirroring capability of intersemiotic translation.

129

SOURCES

Bradbury, Malcom. 2000. *The History Man*. London: Picador.

REFERENCES

HALL, Stuart; DU GAY, Paul (eds.). *Introduction: Who Needs Identity? Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage, 1996, p. 1-17.

LEITER, Brian; SINHABABU, Neil (eds.). *Nietzsche and Morality*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007.

LASH, Scott; URRY, John. *Economies of Signs and Space*. London: Sage, 1994.

MORACE, A. Robert. *The Dialogic Novels of Malcom Bradbury and David Lodge*. Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989.

RICOEUR, Paul (ed.). *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*. Translated by John B. Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

RORTY, Richard. *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

STEVENSON, Randall. *The British Novel since the Thirties: An Introduction*, London: Greener Books, 1976.

TAYLOR, D.J. *After the war: The Novel and England since 1945*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1993.

WOODWARD, Kathryn. *Identity and Difference*. London: Sage, 1997.

RECEBIDO EM 01/03/2014

ACEITO EM 22/04/2014

¹ Felix Nicolau is Associate Professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Communication, at The Technical University of Civil Engineering in Bucharest, Romania. He defended his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature in 2003 and is the author of four collections of poetry, two novels, and five books of literary and communication theory: *Homo Imprudens*, 2006; *Anticanonice (Anticanonicals)*, 2009; *Codul lui Eminescu (Eminescu's Code)*, 2010; and *Estetica inumană: de la Postmodernism la Facebook (The Inhuman Aesthetics: from Postmodernism to Facebook)*, 2013; *Fluturele-curcan: specii amenințătoare (The Turkey-Butterfly: Dangerous Species)*, 2013. He is on the editorial boards of *Poesis International*, *The Muse – an International Journal of Poetry* and *Metaliteratura*. His areas of interest are: Translation Studies, Theory of Communication, Comparative Literature, Cultural Studies, British and American Studies.