

AUSTRALIAN CITY AND CONTEMPORARY SENSIBILITY IN BERNARD COHEN'S *SNOWDOME* (1998)

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Abstract: This paper analyzes Bernard Cohen's depiction of the Australian city and contemporary sensibility influencing not only people's lives, but also a perception of the world in contemporary technologically advanced countries. The paper analyzes the way Cohen depicts a symbolic meaning of a museum guide living in a contemporary postmodern city and how he uses the imagery of artificiality to give a critique of inauthentic living in such a city influenced by media, popular culture and a distortion of both history and reality itself. In addition, the author of the article points out the way Cohen shows how a postmodern city becomes rather universal than a culturally specific site expressing specificity of the cultural existence.

Key words: city, artificiality, popular culture, society of the spectacle, mediated reality

In his novel *Snowdome*, Bernard Cohen depicts William, a museum guide, in the position of observer and evaluator of a fragmented reality of the city of Sydney in both the present and imaginary future. According to Maria Balshaw and Liam Kennedy,

"In many countries the city (often, a city) represents the symbolic order of national identity. More and more, we are told that such symbolic orders are being profoundly fissured by socio-economic transformations that connect local cultures to the global system. 'Globalisation' has become a catch-all term for diverse restructurings characterised by the acceleration of of global flows of people, capital and information" (Balshaw, Kennedy 2000: 15).

In Bernard Cohen's novel, the city of Sydney representing traditionally both local and national space and identity is constantly challenged by globalizing elements making local rather universal. In this novel, from the narrator's perspective, the city becomes an amalgam of sounds, noises, and smells that create an image of reality generated not only through William's observations, but also through the recording of his voice on a tape recorder through which William evaluates the city and its present history in the future, through fragments of conversations of other characters, through TV news, photographs, and commercials as well as fragments from newspapers. Bernard Cohen thus does not depict the city as a modern physical megapolis with various social and cultural relationships, but rather as a mental space in which the fragments of mediated reality (the above media) create a framework within which the rather fragmentary and constructed space of the city is created. At the same time, this constructed space is in constant interaction with other mediated fragments of reality referring to them and thus creating a self-reflexive picture of the city consisting of fragments of reality each of which struggles for its self-legitimization. As the narrator comments,

"The city is an endless conversation with itself, constantly self-asserting. They cannot talk over it. Whatever they say adds to the noise. The noise level never diminishes: if some sounds stop for a while, others fill in the gaps. William hears unrecognisable sounds, deep, echoing, causeless noises, creaks and groans as if the city were metamorphosing beneath the ground..." (Cohen 1998: 3).

The noise from the above extract also creates a metaphor of mediated reality into which the identity of both the individual and the city melt and thus lose their uniqueness of physical entities and become only other segments in a chain of the mediated image of reality. The mediated image of reality the city and people become parts of (recorded on the tape recorders) and the live museum does not only point to one of the characteristics of contemporary postmodern society, that is the influence of media on the

individual's perception of reality, but also man's estrangement from nature and physical reality, the artificiality of people's existence, and consumerism. As the narrator argues,

"Sydney is a city of fanatics: suit-people, God-people, film-people, train-people, food-people, bird-people, shop-people...Sydney is a city of the future, like the covers on old comic books, the metal towers vigneted against the night sky. Shows about the computer age only talk about robots and amusement parks transport: things that resemble movie special effects" (Cohen 1998: 6).

The geographical name of Sydney implies a unique geographical space associated not only with the urban environment but also with various connotations associated with Australian cultural identity. But as can be seen from the above extract, Cohen does not emphasize the uniqueness of the city and its identity, but rather its uniformity and artificiality generated through the typology of people and the imagery of popular culture. The typology of characters from the extract eradicates a distinctiveness of both the individuals and the city. Popular culture, especially comic books, movies and amusement parks contribute to the distortion of the uniqueness of the city by simplification of reality reduced to clichéd models and pictures of it. The city thus becomes not a unique and original but rather artificially constructed. The simplification and typologization from the above extract are further extended to the image of sterility and artificiality creating an extended metaphor of universality that eradicates uniqueness, individuality and authenticity but which also creates negative connotations implying Cohen's critique of artificiality of contemporary existence in the city and of the artificial mediation of reality. Artificial mediation of reality can also be seen from the following extract in which William meditates on the future existence of the city:

"In the future, the city's previous noise will be etched onto metal discs. The former population will appear on advertising placards around the nation and on video loops throughout the emptied-out city. The city's buildings will be roped off and its streets require only intermittent cleaning; there will be little garbage to collect, or sewage to process and pump into the sea. The overhead wires, for all their enhanced capacity, will be hardly more than displays of potential" (Cohen 1998: 7).

In the passage above, Cohen points out a distance between everything which creates a physical essence which is often associated with the idea of the natural. This physical is opposed to all which is artificial and mediated. Thus the voice is understood as "physicality" losing its authenticity and nature by becoming only its recorded, that is, mediated copy. The waste and garbage formerly evoking not only dirt and disgust but also physical presence and nature now becomes replaced by a sterile, i.e. artificial, cleanliness. This replacement of the natural, physical by the artificial and sterile thus implies a separation, and a distance between a man and natural environment as well as the artificiality of the construction of reality through media. In Cohen's novel, man becomes entrapped in the culture of waste, mediation, and distorted perception of reality in which he is unable to find an orientation, value, and ability to distinguish between truth and lie. William, character from this novel, is imposed with a burden to find this orientation, value and truth, but he rather becomes a passive observer and a consumer of waste, pollution, and visual imagery in which he is not able to find orientation, value and truth. While he is given a seemingly objective picture of reality through TV news, media, computers, pictures and newspapers, all this creates an information excess which suppresses its original informational function and thus it becomes meaningless. As the narrator comments, *"To find the truth from television, William believes, everything has to be verified with the same information from at least two other types of show"* (Cohen 1998: 107). While the waste acquires a positive role by representing physicality and naturalness, as discussed in the above example, here it acquires a negative role since language turns out to be a metaphor for waste and garbage losing its ability to communicate meaning. Language of both people and media becomes chaotic cluster of words and images losing its referential and informational function and thus acquiring the status of uselessness and redundancy like waste or garbage. This language is thus unable to create not only an objective picture of reality, but also "a truthful", reliable, and objective image of the city representing Australian cultural identity. Sydney merges with the general image of any city, a city of technology and media which finally melts into the image of the modern fragmentary, self-reflexive and universal city losing its ability to express a specificity of Australian national identity. This can be further seen in Cohen's depiction of William in

the function of a museum guide as well as through his use of the imagery of a museum. Cohen gives a parodic depiction of the function and role of a museum and history guides. Traditionally, a museum preserves important aspects of history or culture and a museum guide a knowledgeable, rational, and respected figure of an objective "knower" of reality and of the past. In Cohen's novel, however, the object of focus, that is a museum, is not a stable, stone and artificial building, but a living organism. The present, living and modern city becomes an object of knowledge, exploration, information and, quite paradoxically, history. Since there is not a distance/difference between the past and present, reality and its historical record because all merges in the eternal present, Cohen produces an ironic twist of the role of a museum. The museum becomes a living, not a dead organism in which past, present and future merge into a mediated, constructed image of reality in the eternal present. This is expressed in William's words recorded on tape:

"History is more than a list of famous explorers. It is all around us. We are living history: as we have preserved our past, so must we preserve the present." He reads the government pamphlet onto tape (Cohen 1998: 60).

Despite these not seeming to be William's original ideas, they indicate the nature of contemporary reality and the modes of the perception of history. History is not only distant past, it is also immediate present which can become immediate history by its being recorded in media and immediately broadcast. William further develops his views on the present immediately becoming history in his notebook becoming, ironically, not only personal history, artifact, but also a future tourist guide. Thus he comments on the construction of a new dome:

"The dome preserves the city for posterity or eternity or however long it's supposed to, but it does not glorify the city. While the dome's very lack of history is what historicises the city within it, the dome glorifies only itself and the process of its own construction.

If this city were older, it would not 'need' the dome. Within the dome are the national gallery, library, parliament, war memorial and, now, the museum of the construction of the dome. The dome has given the city a name, 'City of the Dome'... 'The ideology of the dome is the lowest form of nationalist fervour. It is symbolic wealth designed to disguise a very real national poverty and to engender a false pride in 'national achievement'... Of course, it's anti-Australian to criticise the dome because the dome symbolises national pride and criticising one is criticising the other" (Cohen 1998: 61 – 62).

As this extract shows, it is not only a mediated image of reality through media and popular culture which distorts history and the creation of reality, but also museums that can be artificial creators and manipulators of both the past and the present. Like the dome, a new era monument, a museum also does not preserve and record, but rather creates, constructs reality and national identity without its real historical (referential) roots, that is without the signified. Using metafictional comments on the Dome in the above extract, Cohen shows how history is artificially created rather than historically recorded and verified. Since what is recorded is not a historical monument or a fact but a process of its construction, such a construction of both reality and history points implicitly out the artificiality of the construction of both history and national identity. Cohen thus equals a mediated image of reality in modern times by a media with the artificial construction of reality/identity through modern monuments which do not celebrate the past but artificially constructed national identity and present. Thus what Cohen seems to imply is that the process of construction, not only of the general reality, but the national identities themselves, uses the same strategies and has the same value because both of them are artificially constructed.

Not only the role of a museum but also that of a museum guide is parodically subverted in the novel. In his role of a museum guide, William misses a traditional object of reference, i.e. a museum building, verified historical records as well as traditional tourists. He asks himself,

"What is left?...Where is the sense of the era? He wakes to love without object, without objects, dimensionless, subsuming" (Cohen 1998: 21).

What he mostly shows and comments on is thus not history, but rather an immediate present suddenly becoming either an immediate past or its future vision. Rather than historical records, a live reality,

contemporary sensibility, and fragmented and chaotic life become William's objects of study that turns out to be a living spectacle each individual plays its artificial role in, artificial in a sense of inauthentic living influenced by structures, visions, and relationships that create it. This spectacle existence is close to Guy Debord's understanding of what he calls the society of spectacle (Debord online, chapter 1). In Debord's view,

"In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation...The images detached from every aspect of life fuse in a common stream in which the unity of this life can no longer be reestablished. Reality considered partially unfolds, in its own general unity, as a pseudo-world apart, an object of mere contemplation. The specialization of images of the world is completed in the world of the autonomous image, where the liar has lied to himself" (Debord online).

In Debord's view then,

"The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images...The spectacle cannot be understood as an abuse of the world of vision, as a product of the techniques of mass dissemination of images" (Debord online, chapter 1).

In a world which really is topsy-turvy, the true is a moment of the false. However convincing and meaningful William tries to be in the role a museum guide, he fails to give a unitary and coherent picture of contemporary history and his vision of the world melts into a series of rhetorical questions and fragmented comments as can be seen in the following extract:

"William is momentarily in love, in work, in place. His life is a collection of fragments and he is not unhappy. He holds pieces of the world, each full of potentials and histories. Every second, Sydney crackles with fragmentary action" (Cohen 1998: 23).

Despite the fragmentariness rather than unity as well as despite William's vain attempt to acquire the role of a convincing museum guide, he becomes a convincing recorder of the urban present, local reality and history in a different sense, that is through recording a postmodern sensibility of the present marked by a chaotic urban and fragmentary world influenced by mediated reality, uncertainty, self-reflexiveness and the aesthetics of consumer culture. In this sense, he thus manages to "hold the pieces of the world" and to become a postmodern recorder of reality filtering the past, present and future into eternal globalized postmodern present. Uncertainty, hesitation and a lack of confidence in the unitary and thus traditional authoritarian vision of the world manifests itself in Cohen's use of the imagery of seeing and vision. William is astigmatic and, as the narrator comments on it,

"The museum guide's vision is failing. Some mornings he can't see anything. The tops of the buildings hang in the air, resting on clouds. The museum guide cannot tell what is happening" (Cohen 1998: 16).

The postmodern sensibility William is enclosed by and merging with not only manifests itself further in anonymity and depersonalizations in social relationships, but also in a distance between the natural, physical and mediated reality as commented on above and manifests itself in the following scene in which William, the museum guide, cannot recognize his own voice and thus identity:

"That's his voice, but when the museum guide listens back to it he doesn't recognise himself. He could be anyone: he's this unidentified instructional di-tone: the singsong statement, the rising interrogative" (Cohen 1998: 25).

In Cohen's novel, this anonymity and universality along with a tendency towards homogenization of the past, present and future influenced by contemporary postmodern sensibility and a mediated picture of reality eradicate the specificity of the local, physical and individual. In this sense, not only the city, but also the physical identity of individuals becomes lost in is a constant process of reconfiguration. These identities are changing in a process of their production rather than a stable, unitary and coherent essence. As the narrator comments on Sydney,

“Sydney changes its focus every second. It zooms in and out. Every second it finds something huge or something tiny to take as its newest centre of crisis” (Cohen 1998: 108).

Thus constant shifts and movements further contribute not only to the transformation of the city from a representative of the specificity of local and national identity to that of global and universal, but on the other hand, such a transformation implies Cohen's critique of the artificiality of contemporary existence and a growing distance between the natural, physical and constructed and artificial. Cohen further develops the connotations associated with the idea of artificiality and constructedness and, as it seems, deals with the process of the artificial creation of the image of national identities itself and thus implying its critique. In Frederick Buell's view,

“the movement from a period of globally disseminated nationalism, which reinforced the construction of national identities as objects of faith and focuses for social organisation, to a period of globalism, in which the stereotypical national culture has become increasingly strained, fractured and demystified, and more complex and heterogeneous forms of local culture have been developed to negotiate the larger system” (Buell 1994: 144).

In this sense, then, on the other, hand, everything that is connected to the process and image of globalization (media, anonymity, instability) creates a positive force demystifying nationalistic constructions of national identities based on the fabrication of national myths as represented, in Cohen's novel, by the city of Sydney representing a modern myth of Australia.

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