Radical Postmodernism and its Power in the 21st Century

ABSTRACT: *The thorough transformation of postmodernism from an avowedly politically radical movement into a conservative one in the 21st Century would be one of the most formidable shifts in history. It would account for the triumph of postmodernism as “a world view” (Jencks, 1992: 10) and it would have significant implications, among which the complete abolishment of fundamental traditional social and moral values. I will argue in this paper that such a shift has not yet occurred and that Terry Eagleton’s contention that postmodernism is conservative in the essay The Illusions of Postmodernism is ungrounded and potentially dangerous, underestimating the power of postmodernism to still produce change and implying that postmodernism has fully fulfilled its agenda. I will explore Eagleton’s argument more closely and test it against a radical postmodern artistic manifestation, Caryl Churchill’s Cloud Nine – a play that reflects not only the achievements of postmodernism and the shift in social and moral values it has produced in recent years, but also the still necessarily radical potential of postmodernism.*

I. Introduction

“A contradictory phenomenon” (Hutcheon, 1988: 76), postmodernism is an extremely comprehensive concept. For this reason, it is imperative to begin by establishing the meaning of this notion employed in this paper. As Eagleton also suggests (Eagleton, 1996: vii), postmodernism is a radical artistic movement and ideology intimately connected with the West. Its distinctive characteristics are anti-totality, anti-hierarchy, anti-essentialism, and anti-teleology (Eagleton, 1996: 93-120). What distinguishes postmodernism from other similar movements, however, is its pronounced political dimension. Acknowledging this aspect, Terry Eagleton identifies postmodernism as a political project with the same status as liberalism, socialism, and communitarianism, and with identity, gender, sexuality, and language – but not “substantial change” (Eagleton, 1996: 95) – on its agenda. He situates postmodernism inside “the unbreachable system” (Eagleton, 1996: 2) and puts forward the argument that the conservative character of postmodernism clearly outweighs the radical one.
II. “The System”

But what is this “system”? In accord with Jameson’s definition of postmodernism as “the cultural logic of late capitalism” (Jameson, 1991: 46), Eagleton identifies the “system” as a new form of capitalism (Eagleton, 2006: vii), described thus:

The most dynamic, revolutionary, transgressive social system known to history, one which melts away barriers, deconstructs oppositions, pitches diverse life forms promiscuously together and unleashes an infinity of desire. (Eagleton, 1996: 61)

Indeed, such characteristics of late capitalism seem perfectly compatible with some of the distinctive features of postmodernism as outlined above. However, it is unjustified to conclude that postmodernism is conservative on account of this observation. This is because – expressed in plainly Marxist terms and following a path opened by Jameson (Jameson, 1991: xxi) – in the case of postmodernism and capitalism, the base does not generate the superstructure.

Presumably emerging around 1968 (Docherty, 1993: 35-36) and with its roots in Nietzsche’s work (Sarup, 1996: 35-6), postmodernism preceded late capitalism and, arguably, contributed to its rise. Thus, postmodernism should also be discussed in relation to another system – capitalism-stage two, or “imperialism” (Jameson, 1991: xix), towards which it has proved its power to produce radical change, as it will be shown in the case-study on Churchill’s play later in this paper. Contrary to Eagleton’s contention, I will argue that postmodernism has still retained that power, posing as serious a threat to late capitalism, as it has to capitalism-stage two. I wish to clarify, however, that I do not believe that this is a positive fact, but one that ought to be acknowledged in order to prevent postmodernism from completely abolishing fixed social and moral values – such as dignity, solidarity, harmony, certainty, virtue – that already (mistakenly) appear somewhat irrelevant in the twenty-first Century. Before discussing these claims in more detail, however, I will examine Terry Eagleton’s argument that postmodernism is politically conservative.
III. Eagleton’s Argument

Mainly outlined in the first two chapters of his essay, Eagleton’s argument is based on two fundamental premises which help either explain or legitimate “the system”, here referred to as the argument from incapacity and the argument from active support. Thus, according to the first argument, postmodernism is conservative because it lacks the resources to produce change (Eagleton, 1996: 135). In Eagleton’s view, several principles underlying postmodernism paradoxically subvert the power of postmodernism to challenge “the system” (Eagleton, 1996: 6).

The first such principle is the postmodern negation of totality. According to Eagleton, the rejection of overarching explanations of reality, of “metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1984: 138), results in the failure of postmodernism to acknowledge the system in the first place, which is the prerequisite for challenging it:

Whatever negates the system in theory is thus logically incapable of doing so in practice. (Eagleton, 1996: 6)

Far from accounting for the conservative dimension of postmodernism, however, this rejection of totality could represent a liberation from commitments that will enable the subjects to engage in radical action against clearly identified parts of “the system”. In the long run, this liberation might just as well undermine “the system” as a whole.

The direct implication of the negation of totality is the fragmentation, plurality, and difference that postmodernism celebrates. This second principle is extended to the postmodern subject, which becomes unstable, split, and thus incapable of producing change (Eagleton, 1996: 126). Without a clearly defined identity, the postmodern “subject in process” (Sarup, 1996: 47) is incapable of answering the questions “Who am I?” and “What do I want?”, fundamental for engaging in political action. Despite this, however, the subject is necessarily temporarily stable and, thus, able to take action and elicit change. What is more, as Laclau observed, precisely such a fragmentation of the subject may, in effect, open possibilities and lead to emancipation (Laclau cited in Sarup, 1996: 49), as I will soon demonstrate on Cloud Nine.
The discussion of subjectivity and identity – as two of the topics high on the agenda of postmodernism – leads to the second of Eagleton’s arguments, which emphasizes that certain postmodern principles help legitimate “the system”. For Eagleton, the major areas of postmodern interest – subjectivity, identity, gender, sexuality, race, and language, deliberately redirect attention from the truly significant issues to those of secondary importance that do not threaten “the system”:

The politics of postmodernism, then, have been at once enrichment and evasion. If they have opened up vital new political questions, it is partly because they have beat an undignified retreat from older political issues – not because these have disappeared or have been resolved, but because they are for the moment proving intractable. (...) Feminism and ethnicity are popular today (...) because they are not necessarily anti-capitalist and fit well enough with a post-radical age. (Eagleton, 1996: 25)

Notwithstanding this view, feminism and ethnicity are popular today, I would argue, not because they are compatible with “the system”, but because postmodernism has made them so by overthrowing capitalism-stage two and continuing to pose challenges to late capitalism. Even at this stage of capitalism, postmodernism is as radical as it has always been and will remain thus until all the requirements on its agenda have been met.

The theme of the unfixed identity and of subjectivity is also tightly linked to the final and perhaps most cogent of Eagleton’s points. Thus, for Eagleton, the postmodern rejection of any objective truth and body of knowledge leads to relativism and disorientation, and contributes to the well-functioning of “the system”:

Its nervousness of such concepts as truth has alarmed the bishops and charmed the business executives, just as its compulsion to replace words like ‘reality’ in scare quotes
unsettles the pious Bürger in the bosom of his family but
is music to his ears in his advertising agency. (Eagleton,
1996: 28)

As long as the transformations that postmodernism aims to produce – several of
which have already occurred, such as the gradual loss of traditional values essential to
human beings like the belief in an ultimate truth legitimating existence – still raise
questions as to their rightness or wrongness, however, postmodernism will remain
radical and subversive. An excellent indication in this respect is offered by
Churchill’s Cloud Nine discussed in what follows.

IV A Case-Study on Caryl Churchill’s Cloud Nine

The reason for choosing Churchill’s Cloud Nine as the focus of this case-study is two-
fold. On the one hand, the motivation consists in the recognition of the fact that the
power of postmodernism has primarily manifested itself through art and, particularly
successfully due to the direct challenge it poses, through theatre. The second reason is
that Cloud Nine, one of the “cases in which theatre enacts a theoretical position” –
feminism (Fortier, 1997: 12), splendidly illustrates both the achievements of
postmodernism in producing change and its radical stance toward the old system as
well as the new, thus denying Eagleton’s contention.

Written in 1978-9, arguably at a time when the old system was still dominant,
Cloud Nine is a postmodern play primarily in its contents rather than its form. Despite
this, the play is constructed on the same postmodern principles that Eagleton
discusses in his argument. The distinction, nevertheless, lies in that in the case of the
play, these characteristics demonstrate the still pronounced politically radical
character of postmodernism.

Thus, in accord with the postmodern principles, Cloud Nine declares war on
totality. Notwithstanding this commitment, far from failing to identify the system – as
Eagleton claimed, Churchill’s postmodern play, or, more accurately, its first act – has
a clear target, perceptively identified by Deeny: “colonialism as a system of political
and sexual oppression” (Deeny, 2000: 150). In the first act of Cloud Nine, the centre
of this male-dominated and ruled system is Clive, “a colonial administrator” (Churchill, 1985: 248) in Victorian Africa. To a certain extent, all the other characters – Betty, his obedient wife, played by a man; Joshua, his black servant played by a white; Edward, his nine-year old homosexual son played by a woman; Maud, his mother-in-law who teaches Betty her duty; Victoria, Clive’s daughter, played by a doll; Ellen, Edward’s lesbian governess; Harry Bagley, explorer, sexual partner for Edward and Betty’s lover; and Mrs. Saunders, an emancipated widow – are dependent on Clive. Stuck in the system which they paradoxically help preserve, these characters have fixed roles strictly-assigned in the metanarrative of patriarchy, which the play aims to deconstruct. This metanarrative is perhaps best synthesized by Joshua in a distorted version of the Biblical story:

> God made man white like him and gave him the bad woman who liked the snake and gave him all the trouble.  
> (Churchill, 1985: 280)

Interestingly, in the first act of *Cloud Nine* even the women believe in the truth of this metanarrative – an appalling situation which, in the postmodern view, must be changed. Therefore, in *Cloud Nine*, Churchill undermines the system from the “outside” through parody, whereas Joshua decenters it from the “inside” by shooting Clive.

This decentering and, ultimately, overthrowing of the system gives way to liberation and the second act of *Cloud Nine* is primarily a tale of emancipation focused almost exclusively on sexuality. The play is now set in London, 1979, but the world presented has striking similarities with the contemporary society, offering valuable insights into the social and political changes radical postmodernism has produced and continues to elicit. One hundred years have passed, but for the characters, only twenty-five – enough, however, for them to undergo major transformations. “The liberation of desire as a revolutionary force” (Bove, 1986: 18) now enables the characters to challenge received ideas that no longer hold the status of dogmas and to experiment with their sexuality in all kinds of conceivable and hardly conceivable combinations, such as the incestuous relationship between Victoria, Betty’s daughter, now married and bisexual, and her homosexual brother,
Edward. Such an overt display of sexuality contrasts to the situation in the first act, in which homosexuality was denounced as “a sin and a crime” (Churchill, 1985: 270), and lesbianism, though existent, was not acknowledged. The fictional – and, arguably, also the real – world have changed considerably and radical postmodernism determined the change.

The acknowledgement of change, however, does not entail the recognition of a change for the better, even though Churchill – somewhat disturbingly, does claim so (Churchill, 1985: 246). As Eagleton also suggested, the acceptance of the plurality and difference ensuing from the liberation is inevitably accompanied by the fragmentation of the subject. Betty, for instance, leaves Clive and rejects the gender role of mother and wife assigned to her in the old system. This rejection counts as liberation, while, at the same time, it engenders an acute sense of purposelessness, also endemic in the contemporary world:

Betty: It is strange not having a man in the house. You don’t know who to do things for. (Churchill, 1985: 301)

Deprived of any objective truth, Betty, and the postmodern subject in general, cannot assess the rightness or wrongness of their choices, so their single option is constant experimentation. Thus, Betty finds a job and starts experimenting – though presumably an elderly woman now – in the complicated and rather confusing web of sexual possibilities, proving that the split subject is not incapable of further emancipation as Eagleton argued.

The focus in Churchill’s *Cloud Nine*, therefore, is exclusively on those topics of utmost importance on the agenda of postmodernism: identity, gender, sexuality, perhaps even race, given the fact that black Joshua is played by a white in the first act. In this respect, the transformation that the characters – and the world in general – undergo illustrates the triumph of postmodernism since its emergence in the 1960s until the present moment (assuming that the general situation in act two of *Cloud Nine* corresponds to the present state of affairs). In this interval, postmodernism has succeeded in overthrowing capitalism-stage two and in making its favourite topics the focus of political debates.
The triumph, nevertheless, is not complete, for which reason postmodernism cannot yet become politically conservative. Firstly, the type of liberation postmodernism advocates has not yet been generally accepted. Arguably, a considerable number of people still discredit the gender-independent model of complete sexual liberation postmodernism proposes (and imposes). In Churchill’s play, this aspect is suggested by Edward’s wariness when Lin, Victoria’s lesbian friend and eventually lover, starts discussing his homosexuality in the park where he works as a gardener. Afraid that he might lose his job if his homosexuality is revealed, Edward immediately attempts to silence Lin. The new system – arguably, late capitalism – therefore, does not altogether comply with the demands of postmodernism and still needs to be changed through radical action for all the objectives of postmodernism as a political project to be achieved.

Another indication of the incomplete triumph of postmodernism is offered by Caryl Churchill’s use of techniques meant to disturb the audiences in order to produce the desired change in public opinion regarding issues of gender and sexuality. Thus, the cross-gender, cross-racial, and cross-generational casting employed in *Cloud Nine* are bound to challenge not only the audience, but also the performers of Churchill’s play (Aston, 2001: 34), who are to a certain extent forced to reconsider their positions on these issues. More unsettling than these, however, are the unrestrained talk about sexuality in the second act and the sexual practices presented throughout the play, the most disturbing of which being the sexual relation between Harry and the nine-year old Edward. Above all, nonetheless, Betty’s acceptance of the changes postmodernism has brought about and her view of her children’s sexual relationships as normal towards the end of the play is probably the most blatant postmodern attack on dignity, traditional values and common sense, pointing to what the complete triumph of postmodernism would potentially amount to, if the attitudes and practices presented in *Cloud Nine* were unanimously accepted and employed. But as long as there still are a significant number of people who disprove of such attitudes and practices – and the mixed reactions towards Churchill’s play even today show that there are indeed, the transformation of postmodernism from a radical into a conservative movement hypothesized by Eagleton is highly improbable.
V Conclusion

Even though denied by Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud Nine* – a genuine postmodern account of the achievements of postmodernism as an artistic and ideological movement as well as a political project, Terry Eagleton’s contention that postmodernism is politically conservative in *The Illusions of Postmodernism* remains an intriguing statement given the power of postmodernism to elicit change at arguably the fastest possible rate as compared to other competing political projects. Indissolubly connected to late capitalism, yet potentially subversive if “the system” is not compatible with its demands, postmodernism has redefined the human being as unstable subject, created a vacuum of moral and social values through its abolition of the concept of absolute truth, and shaped the political and social reality of the twenty-first century. However, precisely the fact that the shift from a radical to a conservative movement has not yet occurred leaves open the possibility that the triumph of postmodernism will never be complete and, with it, the hope in the revival of traditional values and normality.

Bibliography


