Lobotomizing the Virtual Violators of the Establishment's Guardians

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The article focuses on the relationship between power and madness in three novels written by Ken Kesey, Susanna Kaysen and James Bailey. The approach uses concepts and theories specific to gender studies and cultural studies. The point of interest resides in the transformations suffered in less than 50 years by the situation of socially inadaptable individuals living in psychiatric institutions. What at first look appears as a conflict in terms of sex or even gender studies reveals itself as a political strategy in the hands of the representatives of the Establishments. The political system simulates political correctness and care for the people, which is the equivalent of treating the citizens like irresponsible children. The governmental paranoia goes as far as brainwashing or even lobotomizing every individual that overtly rebels against the suppression of human liberties. The slightest protest is perceived as a tremendous threat and reprimanded as such. Meaningful for the authorities is not the manifest act of inadaptation, but the possible revolt which has to be crashed before maturation.

Ken Kesey belongs to the second wave of the Beats, when the original ideals of the generation had become commercial stuff for the pop culture. The Beats were in possession of a paradoxical nature: on the one hand, they envisaged a new type of writing, with the help of hallucinatory stimuli; on the other hand they acquiesced to the seclusion and traditionalism of the Transcendentalists. If the Beat writer put up a carnival of his own life, this was only meant as a contestation of the establishment. This rebellious stand will go on with the Desperadoes as it will be the case with Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, whose main hero will be "adjusted" to fit the necessities of a consumerist, tamed society.

Ken Kesey's hero in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* was harder, if not impossible to reform. One had to be "cagey enough" (Kesey 2002: 8) to escape the pressure of the hospitalizing system. If in the Age of Reason, the lunatics put into asylums were treated like some delinquents, in the 20th century the situation is capsized: those who don't accept to be "adjusted" are subjected to psychiatric treatment. In *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* Miss Ratched embodies an aseptic and disciplined world. The marks of her exacerbated femininity can be seen as an

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irony practised at the expense of her lucidity or, on the contrary, as a token of her capacity to subdue bodily instincts. Randall Patrick McMurphy will be delivered to the "Shock Shop" (Kesey 2002: 2) on account of his incessant challenge to the nurse's self-annihilated protruding sexual characteristics.

Outside the hospital, one can afford giving in to instincts and jocular vices as long as one doesn't criticize the system. But the moment somebody dares to sabotage the established order, they will realize that inside the hospital the establishment has turned into the Combine, where "the fog machine" (Kesey 2002: 52), the "fake time" (Kesey 2002: 95) and the electrodes discipline every disobedience. This *inside* looks very much like an Orwellian dystopia where every grain of thought has to be targeted. There is no place for the loose stream-of-consciousness. Harding, the raisonneur of the novel, first signals the political side of the asylum: "Never before did I realize that mental illness could have the aspect of power" (Kesey 2002: 285). And he warns against the Biblical implications of repression: "You are strapped to a table, shaped, ironically, like a cross, with a crown of electric sparks in place of thorns" (Kesey 2002: 87). The hospital is still a penitentiary institution wherein sexuality is the sign of an incontrollable energy that worries the oppressors.

Gender or political problematic?

Of course, the Combine through its ensuing effects: the fog, the deceleration of time and the electrical destruction of brains (concluded, in cases of miraculous resistance – as it will be the case with McMurphy – with mechanical annihilation, that is lobotomy) could be seen as a brilliant anticipation of Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and all-flattening illusion. In terms of gender studies, the victory of the Combine, whose opulent representative is Mrs. Ratched, was apprehended as an oppressive, castrating matriarchy. As Daniel J. Vitkus put it in an article: 'The text celebrates a "natural" maleness which is placed in opposition to a domineering, emasculating representation of the feminine' (Vitkus 1994: 66). But this drive of interpretation simply confines the larger implications of the novel to some sexist role-play. We can hardly say that Mrs. Ratched acts on behalf of her sex. She simply rejects her physical humanity, which is in contradiction with her handicapped inner humanity. She is just a representative of an sexless category created by the Establishment. Following the misogynistic approach would mean confusing gender with sex. On the contrary, sex is overprized in the novel or it is perceived as a perilous drug able to generate indiscipline and political turmoil. It is on this account that McMurphy will end up lobotomized. The hospital regulations tend to be similar to those of an extremely well-regulated state. When Daniel J. Vitkus identifies a misogynist in the delinquent gambler, he simply belittles the conflict for power. McMurphy assumes the role of a "sacrificial scapegoat" (Vitkus 1994: 78), but not as a retribution for sexual sins. That is why we can hardly identify him with a coherent social protester. His top pleasures are gambling, partying, sex and friendship. In plain words, he enjoys life. Kesey ciphered his protagonist with the help of symbolic tattoos, phrases, gestures and actions. Thus, he could stand very well for a postmodern captain Ahab, Huckleberry Finn or John Falstaff. His

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personality is cunningly versatile. He doesn't do anything for free, and it is here that the nurse spots the tragic flaw where she can hit. But McMurphy doesn't behave like a capitalist. He only uses money as a stimulus, transforming it into simulacra. Jean Baudrillard would have understood him as an agent who deconstructs the utopian – which means hypocrite and inhuman – Big Nurse. Leslie Fiedler considers that the Chief smothers the lobotomized Irish in a sort of eroticized rape, the way Othello did to Desdemona (Fiedler 1969: 85). Again, this misogynistic approach curtails the political implication of the writing. Since then, Judith Butler produced her arguments in favour of the gender understood as a constructed reality.

Staying awake not to loose the disaster

The political bias is no more obvious in Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, interrupted* (1993), and this on account of the more subtle means of dealing with the patients in mental institutions. This time, the nonconformist gesture is the tentative of committing suicide with aspirins. Everything is set, apparently, in a derisory context. The hospitalizing conditions are opulent and Lisa, the most difficult to deal with from the patients, flees the institution only to surrender afterwards, because nobody took care of her in the so-called free world. Somehow, she represents the watchdog of the dwindling humanity. That is why she never closes her eyes. Actually, she sustains that she has been awake for two years. If McMurphy reports a great victory over the Big Nurse by having his fellow patients cheer at an imaginary baseball game in front of the turned off TV set, Lisa wants to protect her "parallel world" (Kaysen 2000: 28). She wraps in toilet paper the TV room together with the inert catatonics. Being isolated equates to staying pure, uncontaminated. Even the main heroine nurtures the ambition to negate "my enemy, the world" (Kaysen 2000: 42). Compared to the times of Ken Kesey's fictional world, the asylum borrowed the atmosphere of a democratic institution. They preserve a seclusion room where those patients fed up with their spic-and-span paradise may yell at will. There is even a cultural pedigree of the hospital. It is there that Ray Charles, Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell found their refuge when they could bear the world no more. In fact, the right to say NO is dearly paid: "We were stripped down to the bare bones of our selves" (Kaysen 2000: 94). To be a nonconformist has nothing poetical anymore. The price is isolation and the scornful attitude of the employees. The effect is depersonalization and suspicion as to the real existence of the body. This is the reason why the heroine feels the impulse to cut herself in order to check, by visible bleeding, her physical reality. She even "would like to see an X-ray of herself" (ibidem: 105). The neurotic inadaptable girl invokes Freud's argumentation about the incapacity of distinguishing between fantasy and reality in the case of neurosis.

Thus, *Borderline Personality Disorder* is mainly a protest against social snobbery and pretensions. Modernity began liquefying, as Zygmunt Bauman noticed (Bauman 2000). The world of the 50's and the 60's started to look like a dream that trickled into a red-tape nightmare.

In the conditions of the inflexible "onlyism" (White 1995: 12), the problem of freedom allows for two solutions... only. Namely the ones discussed by William Shakespeare, Franz Kafka, and Jorge Louis Borges: to try and escape the labyrinth

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or simply enlarge its scope. Hamlet saw the world as a set of concentric labyrinths; Kafka created bureaucratic dystopias, while Borges took up the intricate puzzle at the level of narration. In all these cases it is noticeable the endeavour of the political system to control and even suppress the small narratives, as Lyotard called them. In his book, *The Inhuman* (1988), the French philosopher signalled the perverse purpose of techno-science (Sim 2011: 11). Technology can be extremely efficient in repressing the sources of rebellion against a political system. The utmost invasion of the self is to convince the non-conformists that they are sick and need specialized help.

Obsessions turned into manias

The world of mental asylums as a negation of consumerist happiness moves in the 21st century towards petty obsessions and fake refuges. *Man, Interrupted* (2006), by James Bailey, describes the interruption of personal evolution in terms of bizarre *obsessive-compulsive disorder*. The subtitle of the novel offers supplementary clues: *Welcome to the Bizarre World of OCD, Where Once More is Never Enough*. What with Ken Kesey was protest and slyness and with Susanna Kaysen became all-embracing negation limited to teenage, with James Bailey the stage is occupied by "health-freaks" (Bailey 2006: 10). Again, we have an esteemed institution: Berkeley Triumph Psychiatric Hospital. The resemblance to a prison is more and more diminished. If McMurphy desired to be put into a hospital, that was because he wanted to escape physical work. When his madness was questioned, he had to strive hard to demonstrate his social inadaptability. Bailey's characters, in exchange, crave for the condition of patients. It is not about being lost in a different world. They only desperately feel the need to wash the remote control with soap or to purify the money with shampoo. The doctors categorize them as nose-pickers, butt-scratchers or hand-washers. It is like they feel contaminated and want to wash away the fungus of responsibility, affection and racism. The point is they actually dream of being free of their obsessions and of re-conquering the others' love. To be obsessed with Asian girls or with lying in order to create an inflated self-image does not qualify as a revolutionary standard. These derisory weaknesses are not dangerous for society, but only to their hosts. It is very difficult to see McMurphy as a catalyst of revolt against oppression in this new context. This happens because the establishment managed to undermine the self-control of those reluctant to fit in.

The human being transformed into a patient is imbued with suspicion. There is no need for a guardian – this time the Big Nurse is located right within. One character describes her inner doubts: "I have this obsession that I might be gay, among other obsessions. I am not gay but my mind keeps saying, what if?" (Bailey 2006: 117).

An interesting fact to notice is that Susanna Kaysen's and James Bailey's heroes tried to commit suicide, which was not the case with Ken Kesey's main hero. It is true that Billy Bibbit killed himself after his first-time erotic experience with a sensitive prostitute, but this only because the Big Nurse talked him into feeling ashamed for his deed. What should have been an instinct was deviated to conscious debauchery and, this way, the image of his mother overlapped that of the prostitute.

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Billy was blackmailed and pushed into a Freudian conflict. As Alfredo Mirandé remarked in his article *Hombres and Machos*: "my mother and her sisters were socializing me into my sex role" (Tarrant 2008: 49). This doesn't mean gender oppression, but only instilling the idea that individual, socially unorganized pleasure is a sin. Whoever is different is a sinner and needs correction from authorities.

In Ken Kesey's novel the opponents to the system have their brains destroyed by electroconvulsive therapy or by lobotomy. Later on, the opponents will be hospitalized by their families. Once institutionalized, they are sedated and checked every half an hour. Towards the end of the century, we can hardly speak of opponents, but of alienated people, incapable of manifesting their feelings and in doubt when they have to declare their identity. Pushing things a little further, in the 21st century, we shall come across Jacob Andreson-Minshall, a former dyke, now a man, who affirms: "Masculine transpeople are assumed to be renouncing femininity by their transition; they are often accused of gender treachery" (Tarrant 2008: 33). In the context of my paper, this statement indicates only that the Establishment ascribes social roles to its citizens in order to easily control them. Even the delicate subject of human rights is respected as long as these rights are not infringed upon from the exterior. The greatest art is to subtly determine people to diminish their critical judgement by themselves. The rebels have become patients with artificial needs and consequently dependant of artificial remedies. Such a remedy is not supposed to eradicate the illness, but to tune it. The contemporary illness has become a virus which the Establishment may use the way a hacker does. In conclusion, it is not necessary to wound the body anymore in order to have the brain wounded. We are all more and more at the mercy of a sophisticated system, camouflaged under the benign appearance of the defender of civilization.

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Abstract

Gender studies have lately paid special attention to the oscillating condition of masculinity in an ever-changing society (see Shira Tarrant, *Men Speak Out*, 2008). As these aspects were taken into consideration especially in the United States, a very good representation of this straggling sexuality is to be found in Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest.* Oppressing the mental opposition to the Establishment by harming the integrity of the body is Kesey's topic obsession. His hero, the machoistic Randle McMurphy, confronts with nurse Ratched who, in spite of her poignant female attributes, escapes every sexual connotation and calls her patients to reason and social conformity on behalf of what the Indian narrator denominates The Combine. Who doesn't comply with her predicaments has to suffer electroshock therapy and even lobotomy. This is the blueprint of a conflict in terms of matriarchate being assaulted by the manhood of the asylum residents. More than this, the exploitation of the theme of disobedience in a consumerist, clerkish society is a theme which will know further developments in Susan Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted* and James Bailey's *Man, Interrupted*. The result will be a branched culture that is the culture of the social healers and the one of their patients. Interconnectivity keeps being scarce, but at a closer look we perceive the real conflict for power, irrespective of sex or even gender attributes. In the politicized asylums sex is not something to be pushed towards a cultural gender, but something that has to be eradicated.

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