Brian Moore's *Fergus*: A Baudrillardian Reading

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Abstract: *Postmodern literature is founded upon the assumption that the symbolic order of the pre-capitalist era has been transformed by mass media and information technologies into a society inundated with decontextualized signs. Fragmentation of authentic meanings, eclipse of real objects by 'hyperreality' and dissolution of subjectivity, identity and religion are grounded, according to Jean Baudrillard, in the contemporary 'semiurgic' culture. The present paper aims at examining the applicability of Baudrillard's ideas concerning the dominant cultural atmosphere in the postmodern era to Brian Moore's Fergus (1970). In Moore's novel a consumerist society is delineated in which the infinitely reproduced objects and commodities threaten the individuality and identity of modern man. Besides, the novel depicts a world in which the 'auratic' value of art, human relations and religion are replaced by their simulated counterparts.*

1. Introduction

The shift from modern capitalism to postmodern hypercapitalism before and after World War II changed Jean Baudrillard's (1929-2007) position from a traditional Marxist to a cultural theorist. Correlating with Marx, Baudrilllard primarily criticizes the reified market relations of the first phase of industrialism which is marked by excessive productivity. However, influenced by the rapid progresses in his socio-cultural milieu, he orients his thought towards cultural studies and examines the current "state of extermination" characterized by "the ecstasy of the real: the hyperreal. More real than the real" (Baudrillard, 2000). In the present society whose prevailing mode is consumerism rather than productionism, Baudrillard believes, the incessant play of signs and images drowns man in a labyrinthine simulated world. This article examines Brian Moore as a modern novelist whose works have internalized the 'hyperreality' to which Baudrillard constantly refers. The consumer society, Moore suggests, has obliterated the tradition which had united people into a community replacing it by "pervasive and fast changing life-styles which reflect a consensus of media images and commercial pressures" (Sampson, 1995).

2. Discussion

The pervasiveness of the cybernetic technologies has caught modern man in the overwhelming flux of images, codes and models. The seductive nature of the new realm of computer and media has separated him from the 'monotonous real world' he used to live in. In such a situation, the referent, depth, essence and reality disappear and along with their disappearance, since the modern era is the age of the radical implosion of all the differences, meaning grounded in stable boundaries and fixed binary oppositions is dissolved (Kellner, 2004). In the order of signs and images, therefore, the virtues of truth, morality and originality would be meaningless as there is no longer the criterion of referentiality which would judge their veracity (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 1993).

Baudrillard attributes the disappearance of the principle of reality to the successive phases of simulacra or image formation in which image:

1. ... is the reflection of a profound reality;
2. ... masks and denatures a profound reality;
3. ... masks the absence of a profound reality;
4. ... has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1994).

With the emergence of bourgeoisie, the fixed ranks and restricted exchanges of the feudal order were dismantled and "overt competition at the level of signs" was introduced (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 1993). Although signs as the medium of meaning had been present in the symbolic order of the primitive societies, they were in limited quantities and their circulation was possible with the aim of setting a reciprocal relation between two persons, hence the "obligatory signs" (Ibid). The freedom and arbitrariness of signs is simultaneous with the genesis of the first order of simulacra which is named "counterfeit," that is the representation of the symbolic reality of the previous expired era (Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 1993).

Whereas in the first level there is a distinction between referent and its copy, the second order functions through extinction of the original reference and production of serial machine-made signs. As the economic "law of equivalence" governs the reproduction of mechanical objects, there is no distinguishing feature between the origin and its double (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 1993).

The absence of reality is concealed by the third phase of simulacra, that is, simulation. Breaking away from the original outer world, a new type of reality is formed "from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere" which Baudrillard calls "hyperreality" (Baudrillard, 1994). As the models are bereft of referents, the incessant proliferation of signs creates an entire mood of meaninglessness and uncertainty in the hyperreal epoch which claims to be more real than the real (Pawlett, 2007).

Accordingly, the transition from the level of representation to that of simulation marks the passage from the phase in which serial images used to hide the reality dimension of the original to the stage whose ever-expanding signs conceal the absence of reality. Disneyland, as a famous theme-park, is the paradigm of a miniaturized 'hyperreal' universe whose imaginary nature covers the fact that the seemingly real America has already been 'hyperreal' (Baudrillard, 1994). Umberto Eco confirms Baudrillard's proclamation and states that "the Absolute Fake" is a shrewd strategy which keeps people ignorant of the "present without depth" (Eco, 1990).

In Baudrillard's words, the era of simulation or "orgy" is over and the epoch of "after the orgy" is experienced by the postmodern man (Baudrillard, Towards the Vanishing Point of Art, 2005). He labels the contemporary era as the forth, "fractal" order of simulacra (Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, 1993) which gives birth to "Integral Reality" at the cost of the "murder of signs" (Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*, 2005). In the same way that reality of the symbolic order was overpowered by simulation, the sign and images of the third order are destroyed by virtuality of digitalized devices. In other words, there is no need to hide the lack of reality through simulation, since it is time to mask the absence of images and signs through simulation of the previous simulation. Therefore, the last step of simulacra is marked by the "epidemic" and "haphazard proliferation" of value which makes all "valuation" impossible (Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, 1993).

In the world Baudrillard depicts signs and images initially "refer" to the material reality, then "distort," "disguise" and finally "replace" that reality (Sheehan, 2004). In this sense, the serial phases of image generation vanquish reality of the symbolic order which is replaced by 'hyperreality' of high-tech society (Ibid). Although 'hyperreality' claims to be "self-referential," it lacks the depth and authority of reality and, therefore, exposes itself to various levels of reproductions (Constable, 2004). With the disappearance of referentiality which has been the foundation of signification and fixed meaning in the traditional era, an ultimate interpretation of the concrete concepts like art, history and identity becomes impossible, since they have fallen into abstraction and 'virtuality'.

Though an originally Irish writer, Brian Moore (1921-1999) won his fame as a novelist in Montral, Canada. The abandonment of his homeland was the result of his initial aversion to the traditional atmosphere of Ireland. It was his aversion to the bigotry of the religious Irish families which led to the creation of his early works. However, Moore's growing familiarity with American culture offered him a new perspective in his later novels which celebrate the same strict religion that was once the target of Moore's criticism. Moreover, the penetration of media images and commercial valuation in the western societies, Moore believes, has brought into existence frail and rootless cultures in Canada and United States whose people suffer from an "uncertain identity" (Sullivan, 1997).

One of the novels that is reflective of Moore's nostalgia for his past is *Fergus* (1970) in which the writer and the main character have a lot in common: two Irish novelists who pursue their goals out of their homeland, in North America, where modernity has devoured the significance of once valuable concepts like art, religion and humanity. Moore's fleeting involvement in Hollywood film industry and his consequent disappointment at western culture is also fictionalized in *Fergus*. Although Moore had a notable presence in the film trade through his collaboration with Alfred Hitchcock on the screenplay of the 1966 film, *Torn Curtain*, he dropped screenwriting and returned to his original interest (Crowley, 1998). What motivated him in doing so was the commercial and non-artistic atmosphere of Hollywood that is elaborated in *Fergus* (Ibid).

In *Fergus*, Fergus Fadden is an Irish-born novelist who makes a success of his second book and wins instant fame. Consequent upon a proposal by a Hollywood producer, he takes a trip to Los Angeles and sells the film rights of his latest novel. To fulfill his old ambition of escaping from the narrow-minded traditional society of Ireland, the protagonist of the story avails himself of the opportunity and stays in the luring city of Los Angeles.

From the very beginning of his residence, Los Angeles appears to him as an "unreal," object-centered city in which the subjectivity of human beings is preferably ignored (Moore, 2007). Following an old friend's advice, he starts his new life in an apartment of the West Los Angeles motor court which helps him to make himself acquainted with American culture. Having rented his apartment by telephone, he sends his rent cheques to a firm called Western Motor Homes, Inc. He never meets the owner of motor court or any staff members of his company. The so-called janitor of the apartments is not, indeed, an employee of the firm, but a mere tenant who gets an eighty percent reduction in his rent by doing janitorial chores. Cleaning the rooms of the apartments is also contracted out to a company which sends some Mexican maids as charwomen to change the linen and bedding once a week. Sharing his experiences with his friend Dick Fowler and his own future girlfriend, Dani Sinclair, Fergus says:

> *I could live here for a year and leave no mark on anything. Last week I burned a hole in the green rayon spread which covers my bed. The Mexican maid they send in to clean saw the burn, took the spread away, and the same day there was a new spread, same colour, on the bed. No one mentioned the damage. I wasn't even charged for the burned bedspread. It's as though everything here is designed to deny one's existence. … There are no neighbors who know who I am. I could be absent from this apartment for months, and as long as I sent the cheques to Western Motor Homes, Inc. in Lompoc, nobody would know that I was gone (Moore, 2007, emphasis added).*

Los Angeles is seemingly taken over by the "commodity logic" which governs human relations and causes "radical alienation" (Baudrillard, 1998). The proliferation of objects in the postmodern technological world, according to Baudrillard, undermines the superiority of subjects in the binary opposition of subject/object. Subject in the modern philosophy has been celebrated as the founder of history and knowledge and one who possesses the "splendid features of freedom, creativity, imagination and certitude" (Kellner, 1989). Objects, on the other hand, have been taken as innate and passive things which could easily be controlled and dominated by the subjects. But, today the excessive production of objects has led to their supremacy over subjects. Production and consumption of objects have turned into a routine and that is why people "are surrounded not so much with other human beings," "but by objects" (Baudrillard, 1998). Fergus comes from a society whose dependence on tradition protects its live interactions against the erosion by modernity. He, as such, cannot digest the cold relations among American, their complete indifference to their neighbors and their absolute domination by the objects.

The 'hyperreal' mode of Los Angeles also shows forth through the furniture of the apartments in the motor court. Every commodity in these identical houses is made of synthetic fabric replacing the earlier natural materials; the carpet, for instance, looks like real wool, but it is fabricated from nylon thread; the framework of reading chairs seems to be wooden and the cloth of cushions is tweed; however, neither the wood nor tweed is genuine as both of them have artificially been manufactured. Moreover, all the rooms are hung with the same picture which is seemingly an oil painting, but once the picture is turned over, a label is found on the back:

REAL OIL
Simulates the look and texture
of the original oil painting:
SUNFLOWERS
By Artist Vincent Van Gogh (Moore, 2007)

Although none of the pictures is the original oil painting drawn by Van Gogh, they are seemingly identical and indistinguishable. The culture of reproducibility introduced by the mechanical age of industrialism in the 19th century eclipsed the uniqueness and inaccessibility of the works of art. The previously authentic, religious-bound art was lost in the multiplicity of photos and images provided by photography, hence the ubiquity of the pictures of Van Gogh's Sunflowers whose origin was once kept away from the gaze of the popular (Benjamin, 2000). The present mediated society, therefore, not only withers the "aura" of the original artifacts, but also makes unique and distant masterpieces familiar (Ibid). Baudrillard has related the banality of art to its vast reproduction and consumption: everything has become an "image, a sign" and a transaesthetic object. It is as if art has been put into an indefinite series of the market circulation to be produced and consumed (Baudrillard, Interview with La Sept, 1993). In this sense, art is no longer a godly inspiration attributed to the saint-artist, but is merely a commodity or an image whose reproduction can be found everywhere.

Los Angeles apartments are, accordingly, filled with cheap, machine-made reproductions as the alternatives to some absent originals. "Kitch" is the name Baudrillard applies to such simulatory objects whose proliferation in modern cities is the result of industrial productionism and consumerism; he defines kitch as a "pseudo-object or, in other words, as a simulation, a copy, an imitation, a stereotype, as a dearth of real signification and a superabundance of signs" (Baudrillard, 1998). The mass produced kitch obviously stands in contrast to precious, unique objects whose distinctive value is related to their rarity. Accordingly, the furniture in these apartments can be categorized as kitch that proves the lack of reality and originality in the consumer-oriented city of Los Angeles.

Besides, Fergus's acquaintance with Mr. Boweri, a Hollywood producer, and Mr. Redshields, a director, leads him to conclude that the notion of art for art's sake has long been supplanted by art as a means of business. Baudrillard in his critique of the contemporary art foregrounds the notion of "fetishism of value" which abolishes the nature of art thoroughly (Baudrillard, Interview with Gaillard, 2005). He recommends that the aesthetic value proposed by Walter Pater has been superseded by the commercial value; it is, thus, the end of art when its value "can be negotiated, bought and sold, exchanged" (Ibid).

Contracted to write the film script of his own novel, Fergus is given a chance to know some details about both the producer and director. Mr. Boweri, Fergus learns, is a "financial wizard" who "had been listed in a *Fortune* magazine survey as one of the one hundred richest men in the United States;" "he is not an ordinary Hollywood producer but a millionaire who dabbles in movies as he dabbles in lots of businesses" (Moore, 2007). Meeting Fergus for the first time in his own Bel-Air mansion, Boweri greets him with a lie: "I warn you. I am your fan. I read both your books, and I love them. It's an honour to meet you, believe me" (Moore, 2007). However, Boweri's wife later informs Fergus that her husband has just turned over the pages of his second book in half an hour.

Mr. Redshields is "a film director by avocation but, in reality, like many of his kind, a salesman" who judges the profitability of writers' ideas rather than their genuine artistry (Moore, 2007). That is why he refuses to direct a film based on Fergus's screenplay which ends tragically; a happy ending, he insists, would persuade people to walk into the movie theaters and, consequently, boom sales figures. Owning the film rights of Fergus's novel, Redshields does not feel obliged to meet the original writer's satisfaction; he ignores Fergus's objection to revising the ending of his story and employs another screenwriter who would apply any revision he desires. The film which is supposed to be an adaptation of Fergus's best seller, as a result, undergoes so many changes that the word adaptation would sound ridiculous.

Fergus comes to know Redshields as a typical Hollywood director, a man already immersed in 'hyperreality' of a cinematic city like Los Angeles. He has side-tracked the continuity of real life through modern devices like camera or telephone. Various shots taken at different moments are put together to compose a film which suggests the smoothness of the course of life. He never finds enough time to speak to his five-year-old daughter; however, her framed photo is available on a table at his office. Due to the phone call interruptions, a sustained conversation with him is not possible for his wife:

> *Direct conversations was, to Redshields, a secondary form of communication. When he moved from the orbit of his house to an office, restaurant, airport, a new city, a new country, his telephone-answering service tracked his progress, keeping him always in touch. On arrival at any place, Redshield's post-greeting words were invariably: 'any calls?'… Calls, local, long distance, intercity, intercontinental, endless talkings to New York and London, telephone receiver jammed between ear and hunched shoulder, greeting, cajoling, advising, shouting, laughing… The telephone was, quite simply, more real to Redshields than anything that happened outside its circuits. On it and in it and through it, he lived his life (Moore, 2007, emphasis added).*

Telephone communication, for Redshield, takes priority over a live interaction; this is the "mediatization" and "computerization" of human relations to which Baudrillard constantly refers: "we interact without touching each other, interlocute without speaking to each other, interface without seeing each other" (Baudrillard, The Vanishing Point of Communication, 2009). Although modern machines such as telephone and computer have rendered a conversation between two people over distances possible, they have eroded the direct and dialectic forms of relationship.

Fergus is wholly set in an Oceanside house which Fergus has rented to live peacefully with his girlfriend, Dani. His deliberations over the experiences in both Ireland and Los Angeles constitute the plot of the novel which hinges on the way the incarnation of Fergus's past life directs him towards self-recognition and saves him from further immersion in non-auratic American culture.

On hearing Redshields' opinion about the film script, Fergus has no hope of receiving the money Boweri had promised. In order to end an unsuccessful marriage, he is forced to pay a large amount of money for the divorce and alimony. His financial problems, on the one hand, and the fear of losing his daughter and his twenty two-year-old Californian mistress, on the other hand, cause him anxiety. Los Angeles does not turn out to be the utopia for which he

leaves his family and country. Under increasing pressures, he wakes one morning to the presence of his long-dead parents and relatives who have appeared to inquire about his present situation in the new world.

Fergus's consciousness distances itself from real life in its involvement with the past. Baudrillard fittingly points out that "our consciousness is never the echo of our own reality, of our existence in real time, but rather the echo in delayed time, the dispersion screen of the subject and its identity" (Baudrillard, Radical Thought, 2005). Thought, accordingly, remains exterior to the present objective reality and brings into existence the illusion rooted in the past reality. Although it seems that Fergus's parents are, "in a hallucinatory perspective," the product of his "mental simulation," they are real, at least more real than 'hyperreal' Los Angeles citizens (Ibid).

The current technological society has witnessed the disappearance of all real values and ideologies, the subject, art, history and religion. What is left is a meaningless 'hyperreality,' a depthless world without ultimate ends; a consumerist universe in which objects are bereft of the "artifice" imposed on them by human beings; the inhuman commodities which possess "no signification, no aura and no value" attract and finally overpower the subject and his agency (Baudrillard, Aesthetic Illusion and Disillusion, 2005). Subjectivity, human relations and other values vanish and appear occasionally through illusory imaginations. They have disappeared to let us experience the world in their absence, the world without subject, meaning, art and religion. However, all the lost values have the capacity of emerging in the mind of a disillusioned modern man who has fallen into uncertainty (Baudrillard, On Disappearance, 2009).

Contrary to the outer world which is supposedly based on the rationality of cause and effect, the inner thought generates illusions to "restore the non-veracity of facts, the non-signification of the world" and makes it understood that nothing underlies the modern world, that more meaning can be found in the imaginary world of the mind than in supposedly 'real' America (Baudrillard, Radical Thought, 2005). In other words, it is the task of thought and illusion to inject truth and reality into the contemporary meaningless and 'hyperreal' universe: the simulacrum and reality have changed places.

The moment Fergus sees the ghost of his father sitting on a yellow sofa in front of him is an epiphanic one in which the abstract illusion becomes concrete or – in a sense – the disappeared reality cuts a path through 'hyperreality' and reappears. The presence of his family with their old clothes, habits and beliefs reminds Fergus of the traditional and religious atmosphere in which he had been raised. In their black formal dress, his parents were ready to participate in Sunday Mass Communion, the religious ceremony in which Fergus never found himself since his arrival in Los Angeles. The apparition of Father Manneally, the priest of Belfast church, condemns Fergus for his illegitimate relationship with a girl a generation younger than him. His acquaintances reproach him for "rejecting his ethnic background and denouncing the class, race and religion into which he was born" (Moore, 2007). Fergus is also blamed for not only ignoring to write about national issues of Ireland, but also selling his art of writing to Hollywood.

The cultural differences between America and Ireland are dramatically contrasted in a scene occurring at the end of the night in which Dani, her mother and Fergus have gathered together in the sitting room to watch television, whereas, in Fergus's bedroom, his family members have knelt to pray before going to bed. Leaving Dani and her mother for his bed, Fergus watches the performance of a Catholic rite in front of him: "Behind him, the television voices scrambled and faded, while ahead of him, a new sound sent his head up. … they were all kneeling-his father, his mother, Aunt Mary, his sisters Maeve and Kathleen, his young brother Jim" (Moore, 2007). The loud voices of television which had mesmerized Dani and her mother could not disturb his family as they were reciting the rosary perfectly. To Fergus's surprise, Dr. Fadden asks him to read the part he used to read in his boyish days. Fergus begins reciting "as though he had never been away" (Moore, 2007):

> *Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help, or thought thy intercession, was left unaided. Inspired with this confidence, I fly unto thee, O virgin of virgins, my mother: to thee I come, before thee I stand, sinful and sorrowful; O mother of the World Incarnate, despise not my petitions; but in thy mercy hear and answer me. Amen (Moore, 2007).*

Having relived his past life in a single day, Fergus sees his family and relatives off the house or, better to say, off his mind. They had reappeared to remind him of the traditional foundations upon which his life was built. By coming to Los Angeles he had attempted to shatter those well-rooted beliefs and adapt himself to the flimsy American culture. However, feeling insecure in a materialist and consumerist western society, he nostalgically revives his past life through calling to mind the pure 'reality,' intimate human relations and religious values he had forgotten. Although no clue is given about how Fergus would handle his present financial and emotional problems, his father's last words would definitely change the course of his life: "If you have not found a meaning, then your life is meaningless" (Moore, 2007).

3. Conclusion

Moore's *Fergus* pivots on a paradox: what is believed to be illusion or the abstract product of thought challenges the reality of the objective world outside the mind. The culture in which art can be bought and sold, objects enjoy a superior status over the subjects, the reproductions of artifacts efface the singularity of their originals and live human interaction is made virtually impossible by technological devices. For the protagonist of Moore's novel 'reality' has to be sought in the past which is given a new lease of life by thought, the time when the Irish religion-bound tradition was not superseded by the 'hyperreal' modernity.

   Having moved from a "manageable and realistic world" to an unreal one wherein "make-believe, imitation and gesture" reign, Fergus finds himself in an unstable situation (Dahlie, 1987). The metaphysical ordeal in which Moore keeps his protagonist compels Fergus to face his own real self; whereas California tends to disregard and efface the 'reality' of his being, the ghosts of his family and friends verify it. Brian Moore's novel is arguably about the following Baudrillardian statement: "The absolute rule of thought is to return the world as it was given to us" (Baudrillard, Radical Thought, 2005).

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