

The Communist Regime through Malcolm Bradbury's Eyes

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Abstract

The basic purpose of the paper is to analyze Malcolm Bradbury's perspective over the fall of the communist regimes and the effects that this major phenomenon of the 1989 had on literature and creation. During his life, Bradbury was known to have a great interest in communist countries, a fact that can be easily noticed in some of his works, Doctor Criminale being just one of the examples. The method we shall use in order to discover what the texts imply is the one of cognitive stylistics that provides most of the devices for constructing our arguments. In order to do this, we shall apply this method on fragments from the book in search of a dialogue with his text.

Keywords

Communist regimes, Iron Curtain, Democracy, Language comparison

1. Malcolm Bradbury's perspective over the Communist Regimes

During his writing career Malcolm Bradbury demonstrated a clear interest in the evolution of the ex-communist countries. As an academic, he had the chance to travel to different countries, and some of those countries were a great source of inspiration and meditation for him.

Great deals of his writings present a global perspective and attitude towards a former "Empire", meaning the Soviet Union, in the 20th century, a British writer's eyes. Furthermore, Bradbury is in a continuous chase of "great minds", he writes about great philosophers and imaginary literary critics that are claimed to have existed, but in fact almost nobody had ever met or seen them. [6,140]. This type of chase can be traced back again to the communist period, where in many cases most of the great writers and scientists were just names invented and created by the system in order to impress the masses and for a propagandistic reason only. Bradbury is in this search of great minds, just like the communist regimes were in search of means of manipulating. This can be easily noticed when analyzing novels such as *Dr. Criminale* or *Rates of Exchange*, where the action takes place in the 1980's, and the reader is given a birds-eye view over the society [3, vii]. But, just like Bradbury, most of these great minds do not have a real basis, we do not know whether they existed or not, we can only see the

results of their works. They are just names, concepts and when something great appeared, these great ideas were attributed to them and were taken for granted. Therefore, Malcolm Bradbury's irony is oriented not only to the world of academics, the British society, but somehow to the communist systems. He does not take things for granted, he hides the real meaning between the lines, and he mocks history and literature.

Bradbury, like many other critics of that time, had the chance to see the re-organizations of societies through the eyes of a person who lived both outside and inside the process [5, 141]. In the 1960's he saw the changes in the British society, such as the students' movements, the new tendencies and the huge evolution of technology, the democratization of education, the free access to education and culture. But the other part of Europe was undergoing other types of changes, of important value that marked the development of the societies in the opposed direction compared to Western Europe, the Marxist doctrine and the communist system. So, while in the West the society was based on evolution, in the Eastern world the system wanted a different evolution, in the sense that classes should disappear and everyone have equal rights and advantages. At first, their ideology seemed a completion to the liberal one, but it was only something apparent, as history was to prove it afterward. The intentions were defending the interest of the workers and, consequently of the society: the workers should have had control over the products of their work, so that they benefited from them alone, and not a certain class.

This being the context of writing, most writers and critics also felt the need to bring something new, and Bradbury was one of them. He had the opportunity to see the world from a different perspective, and he also took the chance of taking this responsibility and the risks of criticizing, both from a literary perspective and social one. Malcolm Bradbury had the chance to visit America in 1966, as he was appointed visiting professor at the University of California, and since that moment his visits between the U.K and Britain became something natural and common. He had at hand the social context and the means of communication. He was free to express his ideas as he had the opportunity to do it through teaching, academic writings, literature and campus life [6, 140]. Some of these also became the inspirational context, such as the campus and the world of academics. So, therefore, he had the inspiration (Western vs. Eastern Europe), he had the context (the British world of academics of the 1960's, under the influence of the American model of (re)evolution and academic scholarships), and he also had the dialogical resources (criticism, literature and conferences).

II. *Doctor Criminale* – In search of intelligentsia all around Europe

Malcolm Bradbury's characters are in a continuous hide and seek game. He presents them in a rush, they are never where expected or they simply miss the meetings, anticipating somehow the reader's next fictional stop.

Doctor Criminale is one of Bradbury's novels that does not attract the readers by the ideas presented or the complex structure of the characters, but it is again a mild satire on academics and their pompous life, full of conferences and trips all around the world. The readers are invited to a fictional journey all around Europe. The narrative begins in London, where the journalist Francis Jay decides he wants to find and make an inquiry on the greatest philosopher of that time, Dr. Bazlo Criminale. This is how his adventure begins, from London to Budapest, to Milan, from where it cruises to the luxurious island on Lake Como, to Lausanne. From here we are taken to Buenos Aires, then to the "heart of our new brave Europe", Brussels, we come back to southern Germany, where also Henri Mensonge was expected to come, but again he failed to attend the conference, and it all ends up in Norwich, where the postscript is set. And even if we have the postscript from which we find out that Bazlo Criminale died, we still do not know if this is the real end, or there is more to come. And still, Criminale is the representative character of the time, the brilliant intellectual, who can freely travel between East and West, in some sort of betrayal of one to the other.

The story is not a very complex one. Francis Jay, a British journalist, loses his job when his paper, Sunday Correspondent, folds. After one unsuccessful attempt to impress the world at the Booker prizes, he is recruited by Nada Television, to find and research the past of an unconvincing personality of that time, Dr. Bazlo Criminal. Their aim was to produce a series, "Great Thinkers of the Age of Glasnost", in which to denigrate this important critic, novelist and thinker. In fact, Criminale proves to be a corrupted person, with many wives and lovers, but smart enough not to reveal his face or his bank accounts. Furthermore, Francis Jay is presented a real liberal humanist. The big lesson he learns through this experience is that one must go beyond the text in history, and basically to expect to find nothing. Even if it deals with the subject of academics, this novel is not a campus novel, as Bradbury manages to play tricks again on the world of intelligentsia. As we mentioned above, the narrative runs from one conference to another, in search of a well-known philosopher. In comparison to Henri Mensonge, Bazlo Criminale exists; he is active part of the plot. We first meet him at the

conference held in Villa Baralo, on Lake Cano. The figure of this character is not revealed till almost half of the book, to make the readers stay in expectative. At this conference, the great minds of the world gathered to discuss about “Literature and Power – Writing after the Cold War”. The problem is that actually nobody pays attention to the lecturers of the conference, not even the readers. This is how we find out that the German representatives are the only ones that are serious, the Italians are full of energy and at times a bit ridiculous, the Africans are smiling, laughing and always wearing colourful clothes, and all the women want to have sex with Francis Jay, even if from the narrator’s description he does not seem charming or irresistible in any way.

In terms of language, Bradbury likes describing the places where the action takes place, by means of various satirical and ironical devices. His humour is not obvious; he does not write a comedy book, but for instance the reader will have a smile on his face when we find out about a fire sign in Vienna which reads: “Do not evacuate in the lift” or one bank called “Crédit Mauvais of Laussane”. Furthermore, Bradbury enjoys mocking at the non-native speakers who mangle the English in as many bizarre ways as possible, as he can be even suspected that he likes introducing satire in his fiction [2, 86].

Budapest, on the other hand, is presented through an objective eye, at least at a first impression. The first image we get of Budapest is not actually the city, but the people. As already proved above, Bradbury presents things in a funny way, but without losing sight of serious thing [2, 91].

As we can notice, this fragment has somewhat a pessimistic tone. The feeling we are left with is the one of disappointment, as if the character expected something else from the city. The first part of the fragment marks the passing from old Budapest to the new one, by contrasting the ‘grey clothes and plastic leather caps’ to ‘jeans and pantihose’ [2, 91]. What he actually infers are some examples of what the new system had brought, he somehow laughs at them, just by simply contrasting basic clothing items. This sensation of solitude and discomfort continues but the character’s desire to find Eiffel’s construction, meaning the actual Central Market which used to be a train station. Also, Bradbury manifests a great interest in the Hungarian society, more than anything else. Before actually mentioning anything about architecture or traditions, he likes to introduce us to the atmosphere. He presents this world by giving his readers the image of the society, with emphasis on the changes that occurred to the old and new members of the ‘nomeklatura’ [2, 93].

Again the use of adjective with humorous connotation, “grotesque rubber bathing-caps” presented in comparison to some nouns that mark important concepts from the communist period, the chiefs and those to whom one should respect, “party bosses”, “government’s officials”, people from the post office, and representatives of some countries with the most influence at that time, Russia and East Germany [2, 93]. All of these elements, which are comical when you first read them, do not fail to raise the reader some questions regarding the reasons that are behind them. And in the end, we understand that Bradbury’s aim was not necessarily to amuse us but to make us analyse the situation from a different perspective, and maybe to emphasize the sadness of the situation.

Another description that caught our attention is the description of Budapest that Bradbury makes while taking the tram, including elements such as the statue of Karl Marx in square with the same name, which was no longer called like that, obviously. Instead of this square the reader is introduced to the Eiffel’s railway station, ticked with McDonald’s hamburgers [2, 96].

The idea of history changing very fast is again common in Bradbury’s writings. Just a couple of pages before this paragraph we are given some very specific details, time markers in order to make the narrative more realistic. This is how we know that the action takes place in November 1990, as his hero gives the precise day and month, in order to synchronize his story with all public events. Therefore, from the newspaper Francis Jay reads on the Salieri Express, we find out that the event that marks the world at that time is no longer the fall of the regime, but the fall of Mrs Thatcher, on the 22nd. Also referring to a square with the old name, Karl Marx, emphasizes the fact that the society is still anchored in old time references, this society did not have enough time to adapt to the new realities. And this feeling is also shared by the foreigner that comes here for the first time. However, to create the effect of new and modernized world, we are given the reference to McDonald’s hamburger, considered the symbol of American modern societies. The irony towards these social references represented by the hamburgers is the argument provided next, that even Count Dracula would be envious on this type of course. All of these are arguments in favour of the fast changes of history.

But Bradbury does not stop here when he wants to signify the presence of modernity in the old communist regime. These elements are marked one in opposition to the other in these two chapters in which he describes the new perspective over Budapest, meaning chapters 5 and 6. In the below table we can see the transformations of the communist symbols into the capitalist period.

Table 1. Communist vs. Capitalism terms

Communist Symbols		Capitalism Transformations
Marzipan (food)	→	McDonald's hamburgers
Lenin Ring	→	Terez Korut Statue
Russian tourists	→	American tourists
East German attaches	→	German executives
Spies, conspirator	→	Lovers, joggers, summer walkers
Slow chugging trabants	→	Shiny red BMW
Stalin Statue	→	Square of Heroes
Castle Hill	→	Budapest Hilton
Grand Hotel	→	Ramada Inn

Most of the nouns mentioned as symbols of the capitalism represent some of the things the people who did not have direct access to them desired. On the other hand, Bradbury's choices also have a double interpretation. If in terms of the variety of things people can buy, things might have changed a great deal, in terms of the people ruling the system, things are not that changed. The Russian tourists were replaced by American tourists, because the dream of the modern and developed society is represented by American society. Another situation created by Bradbury with an ironical function is the one of East German attaches who now became German executives. What Bradbury implies here is that no matter who has the political power in the world, nothing changes in essence, except from the name of the function the rulers now have.

Whereas the old hotels still exist, but they somehow lost the glory of the old days, as the new one appeared or were borrowed from famous international hotel chains, not the same can be said about the people living the city. The spies and conspirators who used to book rooms on the Margareta Island transformed into the joggers, the lovers and the summer walkers that spend their time there. The strict and obscure life that covered the name of the island was changed into a relaxed atmosphere, where people usually come to spend some quality time. This change of life style can be also seen as a radical one, as the trabant became a BMW, the Lenin Ring, Karl Marx Square, and the Stalin Statue were now replaced by symbols of the Hungarian revolution or democracy. There is nothing that can take back the tourist to the elements of the communist regimes, at least not at a first sight. But, as this is a transitory period for Budapest, not all the signs could have

been erased for ever, and so the communist years can be still traced back [2, 99], around Pszta where Europe ends, according to Bradbury.

III. Conclusion

As we can see from the fragment analysed above and from Bradbury's elements of intertextuality, Hungary is not all technology and democracy, but mostly rural life hidden or not in the middle of the urban city. The author himself concludes with 'That is Hungary' to give the readers the impression that this city and generally the country is still one of contrasts. The capital city, as expected, is the first to be modernized, even if there are still plenty of elements that could not be eliminated, but meanwhile, the rest of the country and the city are in a complete poverty, and living like hundreds of years ago. As we found out, that was the place where Europe stopped. From that place, we are not told what begins, but judging from the description, we can assume that something for which the concept of communism or capitalism cannot apply, as they are of no relevance. For these places the political regimes, no matter what they are, have no effect on the people's lives. The women continue to wash their clothes in the mud, and to live from one day to another regardless of the political changes in the world. All of these do not interrupt their daily routines and conceptions. What actually Bradbury sees is the effect of the Communism and the entire novel mirrors his conception on what was about to happen in the next years of adapting to the new reality offered by a capitalist system.

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