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Counterspaces of Resistance: Peter Carey's *Bliss*

Abstract: The article discusses how Peter Carey's 1980 novel *Bliss* constructs and examines various counterspaces both in and beyond the text. First, it shows how the plot juxtaposes the consumerist middle-class suburban model of life with an alternative lifestyle, presenting the attractions and limitations of both, yet preferring rather the latter. Secondly, at the level of literary convention, the text activates the strategies of comic social realism only to juxtapose them with elements of fantasy, fairy tale and myth, thus undermining the representational powers of the former and hinting at other possibilities of representation. Finally, the film adaptation of the novel shows how even rebellious or critical texts may become 'domesticated' or absorbed by the dominating logic of cultural production, thus once again demonstrating the ambivalent position of works of art in general, and this novel in particular. The article argues that the ambivalence engrained in the text is an intrinsic feature, not only of Australian culture or heterotopias but of most cultural products and practices inevitably entangled in the double logic of conforming and resistance.

Keywords: Peter Carey**,** counterspace, heterotopia, resistance, suburb, realism

1. Introduction: Heterotopia and Counterspace

Published in 1981, Peter Carey's first novel, *Bliss*, apart from being an original and engaging novelistic debut of the then little known Australian writer, provides the reader with an interesting discussion and critique of the values and lifestyles of white Australian society and with the revision of novelistic canons. The novel was described as a faithful literary portrayal of a certain period in Australian cultural and social history; as Graeme Turner observes, "[it] was the perfect chronicle of the seventies, with both its advertising hustlers and its hippies experiencing boredom with Australian suburban life" (137). The growing affluence of the Australian middle class, its social and cultural expansion with the resulting

consumerism, Americanisation, suburban sprawl and hypocrisy constitute the subject of the novel's plot and the object of critical scrutiny. Similarly, at the formal level, the novel critically challenges the conventions of social realism commonly used to depict the life and problems of social classes as it introduces elements which counter and alter the novel's seemingly realistic character. Finally, being soon adapted for the screen, the novel once again engaged with the cultural and social logic of the society it portrayed as it simultaneously played the role of the critic and participant. Thus, it seems that the most characteristic feature of the novel's position in relation to social milieu, novelistic conventions and popular culture is its ambiguity, perhaps best described by Linda Hutcheon as a "complicitous critique" (4). The novel challenges the social, cultural and novelistic practices from within, offering textual mirrors in which the former are reflected and confronted with other, competing models. Thus, its critique operates via a presentation of counter-models or counter-spaces which serve as sites of resistance to the dominating social or aesthetic values.

The notion of a counter-space or another space, which both reflects and challenges the existing *status quo*, draws on Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, which similarly describes the process of constructing alternatives to the existing power structures, not in the distant future or alternative reality but in the existing world. Foucault points out that while utopia is literally a no-place, that is a place which physically does not exist, a site without a place (24); in contrast heterotopia is a place which does exist in reality and "in which the real sites [...] are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (24). Hence the name "hetero-topia": another place, a different place, a counter-site reflecting upon the common real places. Foucault mentions a number of examples illustrating such heterotopian places claiming that they usually perform one of the two functions in relation to the real places: either that of illusion, or that of compensation. According to him, it is precisely compensation that lies at the bottom of utopian spaces which were hoped to make up for the imperfections of the existing world. As Foucault points out, "their role [is] to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled" (27). It seems, however, that with time utopias of compensation turned into utopias of illusion, or even disillusion, and instead came to expose the illusory nature of such hopes, of the possibility of existence of 'utopian' places, and of utopian ideas themselves. Heterotopias, in contrast, constructed within the existing world, hint at the possibilities of other orders, logics and arrangements located not in the future, the past, an alternative reality or geographically distant locale but in the here and now. Their function is to raise an awareness of the possibility of other ways of being and living, perhaps better suited to our needs. Heterotopias, then, become countersites of resistance and sites of hope, offering alternatives, if only mental, to the existing solutions.

The concept of heterotopia or counterspace is particularly relevant to Peter Carey's novel *Bliss* as the text systematically offers counter-models to the dominating

social and cultural practices of its times and it does so at least at three levels. The following analysis will discuss how the novel constructs the alternatives within the represented world, at the level of convention and in its function as a text of culture. It will show how, firstly, in the plot, it collides the fashionable and seemingly attractive, consumerist middle-class suburban model of life with an alternative lifestyle, presenting the attractions and limitations of both, yet preferring rather the latter. Secondly, at the level of literary convention, the text activates the strategies of comic social realism only to juxtapose them with elements of fantasy, fairy tale and myth, thus undermining the representational powers of the former and hinting at other possibilities of representation. Finally, its cultural afterlife shows how even rebellious or critical texts may become 'domesticated' or absorbed by the dominating logic of cultural production, thus once again demonstrating the ambivalent position of works of art in general, and this novel in particular. I argue that the ambivalence engrained in the text is an immanent feature, not only of Australian culture or heterotopias, anchored as they are in the existing reality, but also of most cultural products and practices inevitably entangled in the double logic of conforming and resistance.

2. Heterotopia of Place: Suburbia Versus the Outback

The plot of *Bliss* describes in six parts the crisis and subsequent change of life of a fictional character, the middle-aged, middle-class, provincial advertising agent Harry Joy. The change is precipitated by his heart attack and subsequent heart operation, as a result of which he reassesses both his own life and the role played by his family and friends, coming to the conclusion that it was false, wrong and harmful. Perceiving his existence as literally a stay in Hell, only thinly masked by superficial pleasures, Harry gradually decides to change it radically and to abandon his family, his job, his friends and his comfortable lifestyle. Commenting on his nine-minute clinical death he says: "it was a warning […]. I saw Heaven and Hell. There is a Heaven. There is a Hell" (29). Deeming his life as a stay in Hell, he tries to escape it, with the resulting picaresque adventures taking him in turns to a luxurious hotel, a mental institution, a suburban boring mansion and the Australian outback, transforming him from the quintessential, if inauthentic Good Bloke into a calm and low-profile woodlander. The novel, then, in an existentialist fashion presents the trajectory of this change leading from false bliss, through trials and tribulations, to an authentic existence *sensu* Sartre. In his essay *Anti-Semite and Jew* Sartre observes that "authenticity […] consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks it involves, in accepting it […] sometimes in horror and hate" (90). In a similar way, the novel's protagonist, Harry Joy, moves from the inauthentic social role, through various intermediary personas, to the true self.

In the text, all these stages of transformation are connected with particular spaces which reflect the ideas probed, rejected or accepted by the character and the narrator. The inauthentic stages of the character's existence are embodied by the suburban comfort of a provincial life, regulated by social conventions and pretences. The world of an Australian small town is governed by the middle-class public opinion of neighbours and its unspoken rules of conduct, by comfort and lack of ambition. Until his heart attack Harry feels in this environment like fish in water; Bettina, his wife, hates the town and its smallness passionately. As the narrator describes,

> She hated its wide colonial verandahs, its slow muddy river, its sleepy streets, its small-town pretensions. She loathed the perpetual Sunday afternoons, the ugly people, the inelegant bars and frumpy little frocks. Here, [she felt] marooned on the edge of the Empire. (24)

For an ambitious woman, the provincial and suburban model of life designating her to the role of a housewife is deeply harmful and reductive. As Don Fletcher observes, the suburban ideal, which has embodied the aspiration to own one's own home, "was perhaps always a flawed notion of utopia" (40) generating rather than solving numerous problems. For various groups of people and for various reasons the suburb turns out to be a trap. Fletcher notes, for instance, that "the geographical distancing from the work place, prized on the one hand, also has isolated women from access to work and has participated in the 're-domestification' of Australian women," turning a male utopia into a female dystopia (40). Also for the youth, provincial suburbia is the cage of boredom, stifling their need for adventure and action. Finally, for all its inhabitants, the suburb offers only one path of life, in the novel equalled with consumerism. The main protagonist's occupation – advertising – is emblematic of the consumerist suburban life as, in contrast to the popular vision of it as 'creative industry,' instead of creating, advertising merely sells that, which has to be produced by others. Kelly Oliver concludes that the dreamt-of suburb turns out "to be emotionally and creatively oppressive – a sign that physical space reflects and affects the psyche of those who live there" (1).

Connected with the small-town suburban lifestyle are the regulating institutions such as the police and the mental hospital, both represented in the novel as sadistic and profit-driven. On his journey towards conscious existence, the main character is both intercepted by the police and institutionalised in a mental hospital only to find out that far from being helpful or understanding, caring or protective, both institutions focus on the execution of power and violence, usually because of mercenary reasons, with no concern for other values or aims. Both are represented as totalitarian in their denial of individuality and humanity of the people they seemingly take care of. As Don Fletcher concludes, generally "public and political institutions feature in this novel, entirely in a negative way" (40), emphasising the

falseness and cruelty of the society regulated by rules and principles of middle-class consumerism. It comes as no surprise, then, that virtually all the characters depicted in the novel want to escape from the suburban paradise and finally manage to, although for most of them the escape turns out tragic as it leads to their death or suicide. Hinting at the cancer epidemic, which is to devastate the community in the future, the novel clearly shows how literally lethal its values and lifestyle are. Most of the characters die or perish; only for two of the protagonists, Harry Joy and Honey Barbara, is the escape possible.

The alternative space, contrasted to the suburb and the city, is offered by the Australian outback, removed from society, difficult to access, primitive, harsh, yet closer to the true needs of a human being. Only in the last part of the novel, arriving at the Bog Onion Road quasi-hippie vegetarian rural community, is Harry Joy able to reach peace and harmony with himself, other people and nature. Living simply, cutting and growing trees, cultivating plants and producing his own food, he is able to lead a sensible life, create and become a full person. His ability to finally tell important and meaningful stories becomes a manifestation of his restoration. A poor teller of stories, Harry did not understand even the ones he used to tell or repeat earlier on; it is only while living in the outback that he sees their point and function, and partly through this, finds his role and place in life and community. As the narrator observes,

> He was necessary. […] He could tell a story for a funeral and a story for a birth. When they sat around the fire at night he could tell a long story just for fun. […] He never thought of what he did as original. It wasn't either. He told Vance's old stories, but told them better because he now understood them. He retold the stories of Bog Onion Road. And when he told stories about the trees and the spirits of the forest he was only dramatising things that people already knew [...]. And what began as a game ended as a ritual. (290–291)

Far from being a shaman, he becomes to the community a bard and a storyteller, a guardian of communal memory and a producer of their history. His stories become foundational myths for people who are refugees from other, inauthentic cultures and who attempt to build a new one, true to their genuine selves. Only by combining a natural lifestyle with storytelling is the main character able to achieve integrity and fullness, to have peace, lead a satisfactory life, be finally happy in love and reach the eponymous bliss.

Thus, it is the outback which serves as a heterotopia to the suburb, contrasting pretence, consumerism and death with authenticity, creativity and life. Although the novel does not idealise the woodlands showing the natural life as harsh, primitive and also, in some sense, limiting, in the narrative it is this natural rather than city life that is presented as a viable alternative to a poisonous false existence. The outback offers a glimpse of hope and possibility which seem to be lost in the suburb,

thus alluding to the traditional dichotomy of nature and society, country and city, the authentic and the false, the living and the lethal. In so doing, Carey's novel re-imagines white middle-class Australian life and takes a critical stance towards its 'Americanisation' and ensuing consumerism.

3. Heterotopia of Convention: Social Realism Versus Fantasy

Likewise, at the level of form does the novel clash and contrast at least two kinds of conventions which function as counter-models to one another. Dominating is social realism, that is the set of novelistic techniques aiming to represent – in Ian Watt's words – "the circumstantial view of life" (32), and based on the premise that "the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience, and is therefore under the obligation to satisfy its reader with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms" (32). Accordingly, *Bliss* abounds in descriptions of places, houses, landscapes and views; it introduces plausible characters modelled on human beings equipping them with names and professions, and amply describes their looks and personalities, characteristic features and behaviours. At a larger scale, too, the novel dramatises actually existing and observable experience, probable situations and social problems. Finally, in its juxtaposition of different lifestyles and ideas of life, it also touches upon important contemporary debates. Thus, its affinities with the conventions of social realism seem hardly debatable.

Significantly, this realistic frame is interwoven with conventions of other genres, such as for instance the fairy tale. As André Jolles points out, it is one of the characteristics of the latter genre to operate with generalities (cf. André Jolles' theory). Similarly, Carey's novel, apart from the abundance of descriptive details and factual accuracy, introduces interesting indeterminacy when it comes to its spatio-temporal setting or character construction. It is never stated clearly, for instance, where and when exactly the novel is set: no place names or dates are ever given which would enable the reader to locate the 'provincial town' of the novel in some precise geographical space; it is only indicated that it is Australia. Apart from the name there appear only some names of Australian plants and the descriptions of nature that may anchor the plot in this particular place. Likewise, it is only the description of the milieu that allows one to set the action in contemporary times – no dates or time markers are offered, apart from the relative measures of time that indicate its duration. As a result, the plot of the novel seems to be set, in a fairy tale-like fashion, 'once upon a time,' in an unspecified land, giving the novel the air of generalisation characteristic of moral tales. Similarly, the seemingly realistic characters resemble types rather that fully individualised figures: Bettina is a frustrated wife, Harry – a man undergoing a mid-life crisis, with Honey Barbara playing

the role of a good fairy. Their telling names – Joy and Honey, just as the names of companies or policemen (e.g. Krappe Chemicals or Detective Herpes) – function as emblems and introduce ideological contrasts reminiscent of fairy tales. Finally, the plot of the novel, moving in a circular fashion from bliss, through test, to bliss re-established and redefined, follows Vladimir Propp's formula of fairy-tale plots. Moreover, the novel introduces also clear impossibilities at the level of the events, such as for instance the already mentioned cancer epidemic, the three deaths of Harry Joy announced by the narrator, or the non-existent species of trees inserted into the seemingly accurate descriptions of nature (cf. Siwoń 127). As a whole, then, the novel emerges as a mixture of social realism and fairy tale conventions. Juxtaposed rather than seamlessly mixed, the two genres reflect and contrast each other, with the fairy tale functioning as a heterotopic mirror to social realism. The intrusion of the fairy tale, apart from providing the novel with a degree of univer-salism, additionally emphasises the constructed, fabulatory nature of the story told and its fundamentally fictional character, obliterated by the illusionist techniques of social realism. Despite its detailed descriptions, accuracy and plausibility, the story told is a novel, not a report – and the fairy-tale elements remind the reader of its status.

This strategy is further emphasised by other features of the novel, one of which is the construction of narration with its intruding, omniscient narrator who heavily relies on the rhetorical figure of prolepsis. As Christer Larsson defines it, prolepsis "is a representation of a future event as if it has already taken place" (176); it briefly informs the reader of the future consequences of described events. Prolepsis is used to control the story and marks the conscious artistic shaping of the narrative material. Larsson argues that the extensive use of prolepsis in Carey's novels "indicates a perception of time as closed and an awareness of the revelatory potential of the narrative" (176). Agreeing with his conclusions one may observe, too, that the "revelatory potential of narrative" is based on a premise that the latter is constructed and that the revelation follows from its conscious and planned design. Indirectly, then, the use of prolepsis draws attention to the rhetoric of the story, its organisation and teleology, and thus makes prominent the constructedness and artifice of the thus told plot.

Finally, the very plot construction may be interpreted as one more element which, despite its chronology and causality, draws attention to its constructed rather than 'natural,' report-like character. The plot of *Bliss* contains numerous embedded stories told at various points by different characters, whose relationship with the main plot is not always immediately apparent and emerges only later in the novel. The text, especially in the figure of Harry Joy, emphasises the importance of telling stories (not necessarily true ones), of their healing and explanatory potential, of their myth-making role. Thus, both at the level of structure and at the level of the theme, the novel celebrates the art and value of fabulation, presenting it as equally important as the art of telling the truth or reporting reality.

The latter juxtaposition in turn may be seen as emblematic for the discussion concerning a postmodernist poetics which, in Brian McHale's classical formulation, draws attention to the ontological aspects of literature and its potential of creating possible worlds (11). Read as a postmodernist text, Carey's *Bliss* may be interpreted as an interesting case of the interpenetration of both postmodernist approaches to fiction, that freely expose its fictionality and emphasise creativity via a series of textual devices, and the more traditional ones focused on its revelatory potential. Moving from social realism to the fairy tale, introducing realistic details along fantastic ones and celebrating both fabulating and reporting, the novel becomes a site of tension between older and newer conceptualisations of novel writing. The latter feature seems a characteristic trait of Carey's works, noticed by A.J. Hassal and Christer Larsson. Larsson writes that

> Carey's novels are usually treated as works of postmodern fiction. This is obviously appropriate, but it can also be limiting […]. Carey does play [postmodern] games with his readers, but he is also skilled in more traditional methods of storytelling, and this blend of innovation and tradition makes his novels extremely complex and intriguing. (176)

In keeping with this characterisation, *Bliss* may be read as a novel which treats Modernist and Postmodernist poetics as counter propositions concerning the role and methods of storytelling. Viewed from the point of view of convention, each of them becomes a counterspace of resistance to the other and an alternative to be considered.

4. Heterotopia of Culture: The Novel Versus Its Adaptation

Finally, one more area of oscillation between contrasting concepts, this time cultural, is the novel's afterlife, that is its film adaptation produced already in 1985 (Siwoń 129). Interestingly, its screen version in many important ways did resist, or even reject, the critical attitude of the novelistic version of the story. In his analysis of Ray Lawrence's film Krzysztof Siwoń notes that, in contrast to the novel which devotes a lot of attention to the hellish aspects of middle-class Australian contemporary life, the film focuses on, as he claims, "painting an affirmative vision of provincial Australia" (136; trans. B.K.). This affirmation involves a number of reductions and simplifications which diminish the ambivalent stance of the novel. One area of reduction is the representation of the setting. Constantly showing idyllic, paradise-like landscapes full of lush greenery and introducing 'natural' soundscapes filled with bird noises, the film eliminates the contrast between destructive suburbia and healing outback, instead creating a uniformly calm and optimistic vision of Australia, far removed from the novel's predominant pessimism. While the novel

contrasted the nightmarish aspects of middle-class life with a natural lifestyle, criticising the former and clearly privileging the latter, the film tends to suspend the contrast altogether and creates a more even and peaceful vision of both.

Additionally, the film version tends to simplify the ambiguities that make up so much of the novel's complexity both at the level of plot, and at that of convention. For instance, the intrusive, omniscient narrator of the text, who is very important as it introduces a metafictional level to the novel, in the film is reinterpreted as the voice of the character of Harry Joy, only much older, telling the story of his life to his grandchildren. This shift, on the one hand, clarifies and simplifies the narrative situation: the narrator becomes a part of the represented world, his omniscience is easily explained and his narrative antics – much reduced – treated as elements of his storytelling. Yet, this change has serious consequences as it eliminates both the novel's metafictional level and the elements of the fantastic (for example the three deaths of Harry Joy), depriving the film of the fairy tale-like aspects characteristic of the literary version. As a result, the film presents one character's life with little chance to treat it as an example of larger social and cultural processes whose ramifications may be worth considering. The change is not, then, only technical; rather, as Krzysztof Siwoń observes, "reading *Bliss* and watching its film adaptation, one faces two contrasting visions of Australia" (136; trans. B.K.). More importantly, while the novel is a site of tension between various visions of Australia, its lifestyles, novelistic conventions and different poetics, oscillating between affirmation and resistance, rethinking and countering propositions, the film eliminates this tension altogether, presenting one vision and one poetics.

To some extent, this change – perhaps inevitable – may be explained by both the realities of film adapting and by the features of Carey's writing. Analysing popular adaptations of Carey's postmodernist novels, Theodore F. Scheckels observes the negative consequences of reducing ambiguity (91–92), which to some extent he treats as an inevitable side effect and a cost paid while adapting postmodernist fiction, notoriously difficult to adapt. In contrast to realistic novels with coherent plots and social orientation, such literary devices as metafiction, narrative ambiguity, fragmentation or lack of closure, characteristic of postmodern works, may often travel poorly across the novel/film divide. Adapted to the poetics of popular film, postmodern novels may lose some of their complexity and result in simpler versions of the stories. Likewise, the practice of aesthetic mainstreaming, identified by Robert Stam as characteristic of popular cinema may be seen as another element enhancing the simplification of film adaptations in general, and the adaptations of complex novels in particular. Stam defines it as a form of self-censorship motivated by a wish to satisfy the expectations of the widest audience possible and concludes that

> Adaptation is seen as a kind of purge. In the name of mass-audience legibility the novel is 'cleansed' of moral ambiguity, narrative interruption, and reflexive meditation.

Aesthetic mainstreaming dovetails with economic censorship, since the changes demanded in an adaptation are made in the name of monies spent and box-office profits required. (43)

Both factors then – the intrinsic complexity of postmodernist fiction and the mainstreaming tendency of popular cinema – may be seen as contributing to the simplification and loss of ambiguity.

Taking into account the complex and ambivalent structure of the novel and the relatively simpler version presented in the adaptation, the novel and the film may be also treated as counterspaces reflecting one another and introducing alternative perspectives and propositions. The novel, systematically privileging natural life, narrative complexity and generic hybridity, may be seen as a site of resistance to the film, less complex formally and ideologically. Interestingly, in this case it is the novel which may be treated as a heterotopia, a counter-space to the film's vision, investing it with complexity and ambiguity. Thus, the novel's central interest in the themes of conforming and resistance and its dramatisation of the choice between a comfortable but false life and searching for authenticity are not limited to the plot and characters only. The comparison of the novel as a whole with its cine-matographic afterlife transgresses the novel-internal level and moves the analysis to the external, cultural context and the processes that affect the novel, not as a work of art only but also as a product. Caught in the marketing logic of contemporary society, the novel which advocates non-conformism, paradoxically changes into a film, which seems to praise the very values that the literary version problematises or questions. Thus, considering the novel and its film adaptation, one may come to the conclusion that the interplay of the counterspaces of resistance, so important to the novel's setting, plot, characters, themes and conventions, finally come to include the novel itself.

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