

Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Art

Doctoral Dissertation

THESES

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The Postmodern Baroque: Bruce Chatwin's *Utz* and
British Fiction on East-Central Europe at the Time of the 1989
Political Changes

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Aims

My thesis focuses on the representation of East-Central Europe in Postmodern British novels. I investigate the literary image of East-Central Europe in and after the Political Changes of 1989 and the cultural memory of the State Socialist past. The methodology of my paper is rooted in approaches of the Cultural Studies. I wish to map literary images of a discursive space in its relationship to extratextual realities as well as fantasy structures embedded in the relationship between the cultural spheres of Britain (Western Europe) and East-Central Europe. Therefore, I analyse British novels about East-Central Europe in the theoretical framework of postcolonial criticism adjusted to describe postcommunist discursive realities by Larry Wolff, Madina Tlostanova, or Alexander Kiossev. I also use imagology as it was theorized by Joep Leerssen and István Fried.

The central text of my investigations is Bruce Chatwin's *Utz* (1989), but I also analyse other Postmodern British fiction on East-Central Europe including Tom McCarthy's *Men in Space* (1997), Malcolm Bradbury's *Doctor Criminal* (1992), Rose Tremain's *The Road Home* (2007), Julian Barnes's *The Porcupine* (1992), and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* (1998). Following Kathleen Starck, I regard these novels as members of a specific subgenre I call British East-Central Europe novel. This genre is rooted in the 18th century travelogues of Western travellers who described Eastern Europe. The British East-Central Europe novel relies on the traditions of its predecessor and it also borrows from the Postmodern tourist discourse described by John Urry. Therefore, the studied novels are conceptualized as discursive manifestations of a culture shock. One of my chief aims was to analyse these textual descriptions of a culture shock experienced when the British and the East-Central European culture meet. However, this meeting is not reciprocal, the discussed fictions convey the British viewpoint which constructs a heteroimage of East-Central Europe from a dominant cultural position.

I analyse the image of East-Central Europe in British novels within the theoretical framework of the Postmodern Baroque. The concept of the Postmodern Baroque is developed following poststructuralist philosophy which describes the return of the Baroque both in Postmodern art and in Postmodernity. This concept of the Baroque is partly independent from its original, 17th century, appearance in art history. The Baroque is rather a function reappearing in the course of the history of Modernity as its subversion. Such a notion of the Baroque is a counter-modern vision which criticizes Enlightenment rationalism, its universal narratives, coherent subjectivity, and progressive perception of time. 'Postmodern Baroque,' the term I use in my

dissertation, denotes the reappearance of this Baroque in the Postmodern which was theorized by Gilles Deleuze, Walter Benjamin, Gregg Lambert, Nadir Lahiji, Christine Buci-Glucksmann, and Julia Kristeva.

Following Milan Kundera, I regard East-Central Europe as a metonymic locus of the Baroque. East-Central Europe with its multi-ethnic background and troubled history influenced by the Habsburg Monarchy and the Socialist Bloc became a spatial metonymy for elements which express the Baroque values of a continuous reinterpretation of Modernity. These elements include the fragmentation of the grand narratives of Modernity, labyrinthine meanings, the interplay of *façades*, the impossible realities, loops of time and space, aestheticized force, or the Baroque melancholy of madness. Many of these elements characterize not only the Baroque, but also the Postmodern. Consequently, beside the Baroque, the Postmodern also became an identificatory quality for East-Central Europe, especially in the years preceding the Political Changes of 1989. Postmodern was able to express fragmentary and multiple identities which aided the democratic opposition in the face of a state socialist discourse which promoted fixed, inherited, and absolute identities. East-Central Europe has traditions to express itself in terms of both the Baroque and the Postmodern. It is also my main aim to map the relationship of the Postmodern Baroque with the image of East-Central Europe textualized in the novels discussed.

Theses

1. British East-Central Europe novels suggest a Postmodern Baroque mentality as a characteristic of the textualized East-Central Europe. By 'Postmodern Baroque,' I specifically mean this image which delineates East-Central Europe as the Other, as the Jungian shadow, and the Foucauldian heterotopia of the West. The Postmodern Baroque is both the reappearance of the artistic and social meanings of the Baroque reinstalled in the Postmodern and a mentality characterizing the discursive East-Central Europe in British literary universe.
2. I interpret British discourse appearing in the novels discussed as the central voice of Modernity. As opposed to this, the expected image of East-Central Europe is the Other of Modernity as well as the Other of the West. Western autoimages which can be deduced from the texts represent the successful aspect of the project of Enlightenment Modernity. Whereas, British narrators and protagonists often encounter an East-Central Europe which expresses the failures, the dark moments, or the impossibility of the same

Modernity. The depicted West and East-Central Europe perform two extremes of the same scale, two sides of the same Modernity.

3. British literary discourse aims at finding its own identity in search for an encounter with the East of Europe. In this encounter, British literary autoimage develops in its productive relationship with the described East-Central Europe which it perceived as its own Foucauldian heterotopia. Lambert's idea of the Baroque being a discursive heterotopia for Modernity is in parallel with the textual East-Central Europe appearing as the heterotopia of Western Europe. The literary East-Central Europe mirrors Western rationalist thinking and shows its Other side in a space outside the West. East-Central Europe also functions in these texts as an experimental space for the West, which is a metonymy Foucault used for characterizing heterotopias. East-Central Europe appears as an experimental space where ideologies, fantasies, and dreams originated in the West are realized. Such an ideology was for instance Communism, whose sinister realization in Eastern Europe can be conceived as a shadow side of the West.
4. The Postmodern Baroque nature of East-Central Europe represented by British novels is manifested in motifs which emphasize an existential blurredness described by the theory of the Deleuzian fold. The fold subverts binary oppositions by turning categories into each other. Binary oppositions such as construction and destruction, material and spiritual, original and copy, external and internal, past and present, space and time are seen as antagonistic to each other by Modernity, but only as quantitatively differing versions of each other by the Postmodern Baroque. The fold describes the relationship of Western Europe and East-Central Europe in the discursive reality of the novels as two extremes slowly and gradually turning into each other. British narrators and protagonists often find hidden aspects of their own realities manifested in Prague or Budapest. East-Central Europe is constructed as a chaotic and often irrational milieu, but, in its diverse culture, it presents other interpretations for the established rational values such as coherent Cartesian subjectivity, belief in progression, or scientific rationality.
5. British novels depict the Political Changes of 1989 in East-Central Europe as a Postmodern Baroque temporality. Specific elements of this image include the motifs of collection, ruins, labyrinth, complementarities, *façade*, *trompe l'oeil* illusion, the Lacanian *extimacy*, the empty-centred Lacanian subjectivity, circular time conception, impossible realities, the Baroque sublime or madness, and the cult of aestheticized force.

6. Such an element which demonstrates the Postmodern Baroque nature of the textualized East-Central Europe is the motif of collection, an overarching allegory of Bruce Chatwin's *Utz*. This allegory of collecting or the collection points at the Leibnizian Baroque vision of homothesis described by Deleuze's notion, the fold. This vision conceptualized the whole only as an accumulation of parts, objects or perceptions it consists of. The analysed texts display East-Central European characters who compile their identities in such a Baroque manner. Their identities are compiled of different, often contradictory, moments of identification in history and in their lives.
7. The discussed novels depict a special East-Central European mode of subjectivation. The narrative identities of characters from this region are created from fragments and ruins left by historical traumas. These subjects are not the manifestations of a coherent Cartesian ego formed by their inner drives. They are rather subversions of the rational concept of individuality, formed by external complementarities of historical events, expectations of others, or objects to serve. These are Postmodern Baroque floating identities which exist in different perceptions. Utz, the protagonist of *Utz*, creates his subject via his Meissen porcelain figurines, whose Rococo frivolity and sentimental bucolic lifeworld he wishes to perform in an attempt to hide the void at the centre of his reality, the bleak and grey Czechoslovakian emptiness. I analyse this depicted East-Central European subjectivation by using Lacan's notion of *objet petit (a)*, which is the lost object of desire leaving a void in the centre of the subject. The concomitant endeavours of the subject directed at filling the void in by some external objects describe the futile efforts of some discursive Baroque East-Central Europeans who continuously desires to become something else and something new.
8. The Lacanian *extimacy* is another motif which appears in the analysed texts as a strange and surprising East-Central European feature. *Extimacy* describes the subject as the locus where antagonistic extremes of the external and the internal are superseded. The Lacanian subject exists in its external complementarities, and these complementarities are, in fact, its inner core. East-Central European subjects are described in terms of *extimacy*, existing in roles, in interpretations, and as mere surfaces.
9. The spatialization of time, theorized by Walter Benjamin, is another Postmodern Baroque aspect of the representation of this region in British fiction. Both the Postmodern and the Baroque suggests a worldview where space and time merge in labyrinths and ruins. East-Central Europe seen by British literary discourse is often a spatial allegory of time. It is a geocultural area which has a historical tendency to rise from its Phoenix ashes, and it is

full of fragmented ruins of the ravaging fires. The cultural memory of the traumatic 20th century appears in tropes of spatialized time. This space is defined by objects from the past, such as Utz's Meissen collection or the Socialist Realist sculptures in *Men in Space*, which condense moments of the past in their objectivized worlds. These objects are often showed in their ruins as starting points from where loops of the Baroque circular time conception can start anew. The cyclic time conception of the Baroque creates a vertigo present where past and present merge in a whirlpool. East-Central Europe shortly after 1989 is depicted in such a state of vertigo present where the past keeps lingering on; therefore, characters are reluctant to come to terms with it and the past recurring in a Postmodern Baroque manner. Past and present, like roles in history are blurred in this fictive East-Central European universe.

10. The East-Central Europe of British novels is also Baroque due to its melancholy described by Kristeva as the sadness felt in the void between two movements of the fold. This special Baroque melancholy, Lambert also calls Baroque sublime and Buci-Glucksmann Baroque madness, is a reaction to the Rupture of Modernity. The Rupture of Modernity was described by Foucault in *The Order of Things*, as the epistemological break which disassociates representations from the represented reality. This original event happened in the 17th-century Baroque, but an awareness of this scission continues to be a distinguishing mark of the Baroque even in the Postmodern. Baroque madness or melancholy expresses a worldweariness in a world where representations become surfaces detached from the denoted meaning and, where reality only exists in the fragmentation of its perceptions. East-Central Europe textualized in the novels is such a melancholic place. It is also characterized by an inferiority complex coupled with aggression towards the closest relatives of East-Central European figures in the texts. A special Czech version of Baroque melancholy, called 'lítost' and theorized by Kundera, is depicted by Chatwin's *Utz*. Baroque melancholy also characterizes systematic modern state violence which nurtures either Absolutist tyrant rulers, or neurotic modern subjects, as described by Žižek. This duality of the modern subject's existence is pictured by Utz's relationship with his little porcelain figurines which he hallucinates to be his living subjects, or in the protagonist of Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*. The nostalgic megalomania and self-pitying aggression of the East-Central European characters in British novels I regard as a specific version of Baroque melancholy.