Labirinti

145

Università degli Studi di Trento

Dipartimento di Filosofia, Storia e Beni culturali
Dipartimento di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Filologici
Via Tommaso Gar 14 - 38122 TRENTO
Tel. 0461-281729 Fax 0461 281751
ISBN 978-88-8443-448-7
http://www.lett.unitn.it/editoria/
e-mail: editoria@lett.unitn.it

DEMOCRACY AND DIFFERENCE: THE US IN MULTIDISCIPLINARY AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

PAPERS FROM THE 21ST AISNA CONFERENCE

Edited by Giovanna Covi and Lisa Marchi

Dipartimento di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Filologici

SOMMARIO

FIORENZO IULIANO

THE END OF THE WORLD NOVEL. STRATEGIES OF LUST AND SURVEILLANCE IN BRET E. ELLIS'S *THE RULES OF ATTRACTION*

The apocalyptic title I have chosen for my paper draws on one of the places where the novel I am going to discuss is set. The End of the World, indeed, is a pub located on the Camden College campus, where most of the action narrated in *The Rules of Attraction* takes place. The End of the World is, moreover, the name of the majestic party that opens the novel itself, where the protagonists witness the coming to a dead end of the multiple and crossing attractions mentioned in the title. To their utmost surprise and disappointment, they suddenly realize that their need to fully know and understand each other is destined to never be satisfied, since all they can grasp is the mere surface of things. Their fantasized worlds of love and complete intimacy, thus, miserably ends, leaving all of them frustrated and dissatisfied.

The events narrated in this novel, published by Bret Easton Ellis in 1987, date back to 1985. In the same year, apocalyptic echoes were resonating in a very different book, written by the German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. At the very beginning of the book, Habermas mentions the title of a conference he had held few years before, that summarizes his idea of modernity, abruptly defined as "an unfinished project" (*Philosophical Discourse* xix). This obsession with momentous resolutions, so intensely felt in the late 1980s, was finally expressed in two books published in 1992 by Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, which predicted the eventual global triumph of political and economic liberalism.

This troublesome sense of fear and expectation pervades intensely Ellis's novel. Entwining the stories of three students at an Ivy League fictional college in New England, the writer effectively depicts the generation of young adults during the Reagan era, when the collapse of communism and the beginning of a new historical phase were looming on the horizon and yet so hard to foresee, thus casting a shadow of anxiety and uncertainty on the lives of the protagonists. As I will try to demonstrate, the novel, by recounting the private lives of three people in their early twenties during the Yuppie Age, bridges us back to the dawn of capitalism in eighteenth century Europe, by insisting on those aspects of private life that, back then, had reshaped the domains of the public and the private in bourgeois societies. In this respect, the reference to Habermas sounds all the more convincing, since it is Habermas's work that has explored the redefinition of private and intimate spaces as a turning point in early capitalistic Europe. Both the end of the world prophesied by Ellis and the never-ending project of modernity theorized by Habermas, require an analysis of the moment when this very world began. Consequently, a study of the rules that have differentiated public from private spaces helps us better grasp the genesis and the different articulations of modern capitalism.

Habermas's book, on the one hand, has thoroughly analyzed these rules; Ellis's novel, on the other, has subtly satirized them.

There is a relation between the ways in which both texts represent the definition of the intimate sphere in opposition with the public one, as a characteristic of the modern age. While Habermas describes its genesis, Ellis focuses on its tragicomic collapse.

The Rules of Attraction narrates the personal experiences of the three protagonists in their Freshman year at Camden, an Ivy League college in New England. The writer morbidly insists on attraction and sex: Lauren uses pictures of venereal diseases as a means to control her own sexual desire and defer the moment when she would become sexually active. Paul is hopelessly attracted to Sean, the male anti-hero of the novel. Sean, who is in love with Lauren, is incapable of reconciling his sexual drives with his romantic feelings. The three main characters stage a complex and sophisticated pantomime of the interplay between the control of the self and a devouring urge to consume sexuality and relationships as ordinary commodities, as a response to the dominant yuppie ideology of the 1980s.

The Rules of Attraction perfectly balances Ellis's debut novel, *Less Than Zero*, published in 1985, where the protagonist, Clay, goes back to his hometown Los Angeles during a college break; in *The Rules of Attraction*, instead, it is college life that acquires prominence in Ellis's attempt to portray the post-baby boomer generation, thus drawing attention to how crucial the spatial structuring of both novels is to their whole narrative economy. While *Less Than Zero* reproduces an always expanding spatial dimension, mirroring the off-centered configuration of Los Angeles, the campus where the action of *The Rules of Attraction* takes place is, predictably, rendered as an enclosed structure, easy to observe and envisage. The rules established among Sean, Paul and Lauren revolve around a tangible erotic tension that is never resolved, thus working as an absent center that allows the story to go on, though reaching no climax nor final resolution. Erotic tension gravitates around a blank spot, a central void, which turns out to be, in the narrative economy of the text, the impossibility for the protagonists to deeply know each other. Each of the three narrators, in fact, elaborates the image of the other two through fantasies or projections; even though fantasized images of the others inevitably crumble when confronted with reality, they nevertheless follow a pre-ordered drive that leads to the zero-degree of mutual knowledge and knowability. The sentence that, resignedly, closes the novel, bluntly states: "No one will ever know anyone. We just have to deal with each other. You're not ever gonna know me" (Ellis 291). This drastic conclusion has been often dismissed as an overt disapproval of and a simple moralistic attack against the superficiality and the consumerism of the 1980s. Yet, as often happens with Ellis's novels (*American Psycho* probably is, in this sense, the most outstanding example), a moralistic reading of the text just misses its crucial and subtle political implications. However, as right as such a conclusion may be in its broadest sense, it fails to take into account the structural role that this strongly affirmed hollowness actually plays in a novel centered on attraction and constructed as a system of forces creating a magnetic field. From this perspective, in fact, the void produced by the impossibility of deeply and completely knowing each other works as a stabilizing element, which compensates for the possible imbalances determined by attraction.

My reading of *The Rules of Attraction*, as I was arguing before, benefits from the by now canonic theorization of private vs. public space carried out by Jürgen Habermas in his *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962). Habermas's thought, which I have referred to with relation to the apocalyptic overtone used to evoke and describe the 'end' of the world (and of modernity), proves useful again to understand

how the space of campus is theorized and ideologically elaborated. As I will try to argue, Habermas's conception of modernity, constructed through a redefinition of the domains of the public and the private, is mockingly taken up and brought to its extreme consequences in *The Rules of Attraction*, whose open and disappointing ending leaves no hope for the fulfillment of any attempted project, be it merely outlined by the rules of the attraction Ellis mentions, or, more ambitiously, by modernity in its entirety, as Habermas had stated.

In its effort to vividly depict the protagonists of the terminal phase of US capitalism, Ellis's novel acts out a performative parody of the processes that had marked, as Habermas reminds us, the rise of bourgeois power in eighteenth century Europe, narrating its downfall at the end of the twentieth century. Public sphere, in the late 1980s United States, is constructed as a dimension that, rather than privatizing intimate relationships, as Habermas had theorized for the eighteenth century Europe, utterly exploits their performative potential. In *The Rules of Attraction*, college campus is configured as a panoptical space that ascribes a distinct role to its inhabitants; the novel, as a whole, enacts a mechanism through which sex and relations are deprivatized and gradually incorporated into a public dimension governed according to previously defined, albeit implicit and mostly unknown, rules. This deprivatizing turn accounts for the title of the novel, which insists not just on attraction as a merely sexual drive but on the rules that turn sexual attraction into an ordering principle that defines the college as a public sphere in its own right.

Habermas points out that, in eighteenth century, the domestic and familiar space, gradually institutionalized, had become the locus where the mediation between individuals and society could be negotiated. He maintains that the patriarchal family was a scene of psychological emancipation, that "seemed to be established voluntarily and by free individuals and to be maintained without coercion; it seemed to rest on the lasting community of love on the part of the two spouses; it seemed to permit that non-instrumental development of all faculties that marks the cultivated personality" (*Public Sphere* 46-7).

The definition of the divide between the public and the private, which, according to Habermas, has marked a crucial, though quite blurred, watershed in the historical configuration of modern European societies, is exploited by Ellis as a virtual limit constantly pushed forward. By representing the college campus as a political space, Ellis brings Habermas's reflection to its utmost consequences: the campus, in the novel, is rendered as a visible public space, where the domains of public and private spheres are clearly and recognizably set apart from each other. The space of an extremely individualized private sphere is theoretically located in the individual rooms where each student lives, so that the campus comes to be conceived as a structure juxtaposing very small private rooms, on the one hand, and public spaces (classrooms, libraries, students' unions and fraternities, bars and pubs) that should meet the college life need for publicity and sociality, on the other. Yet, in narrative terms, the campus is actually constructed through the exposition of the protagonists' private lives as integrally visible, emptying, at the same time, public spaces of their official functions and resignifying them according to the private, and specifically erotic and sexual dynamics at play among the characters. The performative character of campus life, thus, subverts its official balance of public function and private space: the narrative rendering of the protagonists' lives, in fact, shows how private rooms are the real, and probably the only, public spaces on campus, discrete places where the definition of the protagonists' identities as college students is complied with and acted out, thus performing in the

private dimension of the single room what an unstated, implicit behavior code imposes on each student.

On the contrary, public space is completely cleared of any social function. The novel never mentions, for instance, students' academic life, as if it had no real part in defining their public status as students. The campus public dimension, thus, is not marked by the rhythm of academic life, but only by the private activities where the protagonists individually perform the unwritten rules of their temporary condition as freshmen. Again, the novel seems to evoke the terms of Habermas's discussion of the modern family, while portraying the young generation far away from the family. Habermas theorizes privacy as an ideological structure capable of rendering its constitutive component, the bourgeois family, totally oblivious of its real origins, which is ultimately ascribable to economic factors. The distinctive traits of this ideology, according to Habermas, can be found in the three aforementioned characteristics: voluntariness, community of love, and cultivation. Ellis's characters, indeed, take Habermas's reflections literally; yet, the space of the public and the space of the private have already been deprived of their alleged proper functions, and turned into blank scenes ruled by the unexpressed codes of individual performance.

Performance is, ultimately, the means through which the domains of the private and the public are overturned, and this process is thematized by Ellis as the distinctive trait of campus as a political space. Habermas's definition of ideology, closer to Althusser's than to Marx's because of his insisting on the performative nature of intimacy as a structuring element inside the patriarchal family, is mirrored and fully rendered in the very structure of the novel, where characters speak in first person, reporting their personal experiences though often visibly denying or contradicting what other people say. Habermas affirms that the pure "human" essence of family, ideologically produced by the relations of power interwoven among its members, was expressed and definitely sanctioned through the letter and the diary: "through letter writing the individual unfolded himself in his subjectivity" (*Public Sphere* 48), while the diary is simply defined as "a letter addressed to the sender, and the first-person narrative became a conversation with one's self addressed to another person" (*Public Sphere* 49). Here is the key to grasp the extremely parodic character of Ellis's novel, which, to a certain extent, is also reminiscent of Choderlos de Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. *The Rules of Attraction* is written as a collection of diary entries, in what looks like the perfect ironic replica of the attempt to detach the intimate structure of family from the external, public realm. This process, back in the eighteenth century, was produced and marked by the laws of an emerging capitalism, while, in *The Rules of Attraction*, it is late capitalism, and the force of its well known and nevertheless never overtly nor explicitly recalled rules, that provide the structural (in social and economic terms) frame that allows attraction and its rules to be fully displayed and correctly interact with each other.

The very essence of Ellis's novel, in the end, is textual and discursive. It is not about simple attraction, but about the rules of attraction. However, these rules, rather than simply governing the college campus, actually construct and signify it as a public space, even when it seems to mark the physical space of intimacy, with the assignment of private rooms to each student. It is here that the word rule loses its primary meaning of authoritative and binding instruction, to gain the value it has inside religious orders or communities (eg "the rule of St. Benedict"), which turns full circle with the ominous and apocalyptic threat foreshadowed in my title: not a prescription but a code, a series

of regulations that, rather than imposing their requirements on people, gently mold their behavior and work as the semiotic evidence of an already established practice.

Ellis's novel, thus, by satirically replicating Habermas's analysis of the translation of former public spaces into private ones operated by the bourgeois power in the 18th century and here clearly overturned, dovetails with the recent reflection carried out, among others, by Hardt and Negri in their 2009 *Commonwealth*, about late capitalism as the biopolitical exploitation of emotions, bodies and sex.

Works Cited

Annesley, James. *Blank Fiction. Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel*. New York: Macmillan, 1998. Print.

Ellis, Bret E. *The Rules of Attraction*. London: Picador, 1987. Print.

Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and The Last Man.* New York: Avon, 1992. Print.

Habermas, Jurgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Thomas Burger. Cambridge MA: MIT Press. 1991. Print.

---. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. Trans. Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1987. Print.

Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. *Commonwealth*. Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 2009. Print.

Young, Elizabeth, and Graham Caveney, eds. *Shopping in Space. Essays on America's Blank Generation Fiction*. New York: Grove, 1994. Print.