

Kostić, Milena

Pop culture in Mark Ravenhill's plays *Shopping and fucking* and *Faust is dead*

Brno studies in English. 2011, vol. 37, iss. 1, pp. [161]-172

ISSN 0524-6881 (print); ISSN 1805-0867 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2011-1-11>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/118129>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.



Milena Kostić

Pop Culture in Mark Ravenhill's Plays *Shopping and Fucking* and *Faust is Dead*

Abstract

Mark Ravenhill deals with the issue of popular culture, especially its aspect of consumerism that both Fiske and Ang discussed. Although Ravenhill, like Fiske, acknowledges the power of the people to resist the negative influence of the consumer society, he gives a special emphasis on the marginality of such a power (in accord with Ang's opinion), as will be demonstrated on the example of his plays *Shopping and Fucking* and *Faust is Dead*.

Key words

Pop culture; consumerism; resistance; defiance; marginality

According to John Fiske (1989: 1–2), popular culture is the culture of the subordinated as they actively resist their subordination: “Popular culture is made by various factions of subordinated or disempowered people out of the resources [...] that are provided by the social system that disempowered them.”

Most scholars writing in the mid-twentieth century believed that pop culture wholly reflected the motivations of the dominant classes. In the most pessimistic reading of this perspective, usually termed the mass culture critique, cultural consumers are completely pacified and homogenized in the process of consumption. As unquestioning recipients, consumers contribute nothing to the meaning of popular culture – and thus nothing to society at large – but instead are repetitively victimized and immobilized by it.

On the other hand, John Fiske acknowledges that while the larger social system provides cultural resources to consumers (and benefits economically from the process of consumption), it is only consumers who can popularize objects or practices. In his view, the power, ultimately, is with the people:

Popular texts [...] are completed only when taken up by people and inserted into their everyday culture. The people make popular culture at the interface between everyday life and consumption of the products of the cultural industries [...] Relevance can be produced only by the people, for only they can know which texts enable them to make the meanings that will function in their everyday lives. (Fiske 1989: 6)

Others argue that we need to be cautious in applauding the apparent power of active audiences to generate their own cultural meanings, because this power is actually quite limited. In reference to media consumption, Ien Ang writes:

Audiences may be active in myriad ways using and interpreting media, but it would be utterly out of perspective to cheerfully equate 'active' with 'powerful', in the sense of 'taking control' at an enduring, structural or institutional level. It is a perfectly reasonable starting point to consider people's active negotiations with media texts and technologies as empowering in the context of their everyday lives [...] but we must not lose sight of the marginality of this power. (Ang 1990: 247)

Mark Ravenhill deals with the issue of popular culture, especially its aspect of consumerism that both Fiske and Ang discussed. Although Ravenhill, like Fiske, acknowledges the power of the people to resist the negative influence of the consumer society, he gives a special emphasis on the marginality of such a power (in accord with Ang's opinion), as will be demonstrated on the example of his plays *Shopping and Fucking* and *Faust is Dead*.

Shopping and Fucking

Although the names of the protagonists are given after a very marketable boys' band of the 1990's, the name of the main villain in the play is Brian, which is sharply reminiscent of O'Brien from Orwell's *1984*. Nowadays, the rules of the game are set by forces such as: competition, terms of trade, world markets, global investors. People are being convinced that an individual life is a bunch of alternatives while there is no alternative to the shape of the society in which that life is lived. Although the individual is more than ever dependent on the play of market forces, if anything goes wrong he has only himself to blame. Such is the state of mind of Ravenhill's characters at the opening of the play. That Lulu plays by the rules is illustrated from the beginning by her inability to share ready-made meals simply 'because they are specifically designed as individual portions'. Moreover, for whatever goes wrong, Lulu and Robbie have only one another to blame.

Shopping and Fucking, which reflects the kind of individuality that is promoted and imposed in the modern world as well as life reduced to drugs, spiritual and physical prostitution and masochistic fantasies which offer no salvation, opens with one of the characters, Mark, vomiting on stage, his body refusing to

accept the food which contains “all the tastes in the world”, which represents “an empire under cellophane” (Ravenhill 2001: 1), for which once it was necessary to invade and occupy and which is now served in front of him. Since he still shows some remnants of rebellion, which means that his “education” has not been fully successful, Mark has to get help, to submit himself to a medical treatment, to another instance of Althusser’s ideological state apparatuses, through which his emotional flattening will be finished. A mental hospital which is supposed to treat drug addiction seems to have taken care of Mark to treat his emotional addiction; namely, there he is warned that emotional dependencies are as addictive as drugs and, thus, any personal attachment should be avoided at all costs unless it is not taken as a mere financial “transaction”:

I have this personality, you see? Part of me that gets addicted. I have a tendency to define myself purely in terms of my relationship to others. I have no definition of myself, you see. So I attach myself to others as a means of avoidance, of avoiding knowing the self. Which is actually potentially very destructive. For me – destructive for me. (32–33)

Significantly, while Mark is talking about his relation to other people, in this case to Gary, the clatter of coins is heard only to emphasize the prevailing consumer attitude even to people.

After Mark leaves to get sorted out, Lulu and Robbie find a job, to provide. During Lulu’s interview for a teleshop commercial, Brian, the boss, shows her an illustrated plastic plate and teaches her how it should be sold: “Our viewers, they have to believe that what we hold up to them is special. For the right sum – life is easier, richer, more fulfilling. And you have to believe that, too” (35).

What is illustrated is a moment from ‘The Lion King’, the cartoon by Walt Disney, a grossly simplified version of *Hamlet*, when the ghost of Simba’s father tells him that he must take his place in the cycle of being, which, in the cartoon, ultimately means that he has to kill his murderous and throne-usurping uncle. That moment is Brian’s favourite bit because it conveys a message that to reach some kind of right order we have to do things that are wrong. This reveals Brian from the start as a hard-core Machiavellist. Next, Brian practically blackmails Lulu into taking her blouse off while performing Irina’s final lines from Checkov’s *Three Sisters* pointing out that he is there to assess her talents, whatever they may be. The idea that arises from this scene is that most people, seeing no other way, make too many compromises every day. It becomes more and more difficult within the contemporary capitalist system not to sell oneself, simply because of one’s inability to envision the alternative. Thus, towards the end of the interview, to Brian’s question: “So you think you can sell?”, Lulu promptly answers: “I know I can sell” (40).

Brian, a maker of TV commercials, a drug pusher, the great Father figure, the teacher and master, the saviour of his son and the pastor preaching to his flock the gospel of consumerism, leads Lulu and Robbie through an initiation rite: in order

to be accepted into the dog-eat-dog world, Lulu and Robbie have to sell 300Es. They fail. However, by means of intimidation and verbal seduction, the purpose of which is to make subjects out of individuals, they will eventually be taught a lesson: that money is civilization and civilization money; that behind beauty, behind God, behind paradise, stands money:

And civilization – how did we get here? By war, by struggle, kill or be killed. And money – it’s the same thing [...] the getting is cruel, is hard, but the having is civilization. (87)

Brian’s vision of the future is that of “shopping [...] television”, which, as one of the pure brainwashers, will dumb our senses, anaesthetize our hearts and minds, make our existence a question of hallucination. Noticeably, Brian is very diligent in his work – he drills his flock until they learn the lesson and become civilized. There are strict rules that have to be followed, because they give meaning to the chaos, as Brian perceives the world. He will allow Lulu and Robbie to keep the money they owe him for having learnt the crucial lesson, i.e. for being successfully converted into a new faith. The process of conversion is explicitly showed in a scene in which the old Bible is replaced with a new one, the Bible of the West, in which spirituality is lost under the cover of material comfort, in which civilization runs on money. The first words in this Bible are: “Get. The money. First.” (87). Brian’s answer to one of the most crucial questions, which are to trace the responsibility for our present condition, “how did we get here?” is:

By war, by struggle, kill or be killed. And money – it’s the same thing, you understand? The getting is cruel, is hard, but the having is civilization. Then we are civilized. (87)

When Brian asks Robbie; “at the final reckoning, behind beauty, behind God, behind paradise, peel them away and what is there? [...] Son, I’m asking you,” (78) Robbie’s answer is “father” (78), Brian corrects him: it is not father, it is money. Obviously, whether this process will be successful or not depends on the teacher. The fact that he has preserved his ability to shed a tear, “a little drop of pure emotion” (79), when watching the video of his little son playing the cello, while at the same time he does not hesitate to provide merciless punishment for those who fail the test, gives us reasons to believe that Brian is a good one.

What is meant by progress and civilization is the amount of the most visible flow of information, the intention of which is to dumb us mentally and immobilize us physically. An illusion of an abundance of choices as well as the total freedom to choose is supported, theoretically, by advertisements and, practically, by supermarkets and malls, institutions intimately connected to spending as a new form of mass indulgence. They are generally viewed as a sort of contemporary, artificial paradise in which one gains a false sense of power and an illusion of be-

ing able to satisfy all his needs. In reality we can only choose from what the system has to offer, so logically, choosing anything different from what the system prescribes is not an option. The freedom we have applies only to the most banal choices, such as when one has to decide on which bar of chocolate to eat, whereas the more important decision whether to buy it or simply take it is conditioned and determined by the society. "There is so much choice. Too much. Which I think they do deliberately," (29) objects Lulu. Even our lives are put on sale, as Adrienne Rich would say, "buyable and saleable at any moment, mere blips on a screen" (Rich 1993: 20) in the mass market society.

Robbie is also trying to provide. But no sooner had he got a job at a leading fast food restaurant than he got fired for provoking a customer into physically attacking him. When the man could not decide whether he wanted his burger with or without cheese, Robbie warned him about the difference between true and false choices in the consumer society. First, the crazed man is confused at being reminded that there can be any choice at all, but then he also gets reminded that he actually does not have any real choice, which inevitably ends up in a burst of hatred and violence.

Mark, who has been a heroin addict for years, has been convinced in the rehabilitation centre that the whole problem is entirely in him. Instead of helping him to discover in himself the potential and ability to respond to the world creatively, to see and name the defects of the system and consciously direct his energy into changing things for better, they are telling him that in order to be cured he is not to form any personal attachment. He breaks the rule, and is dismissed from the centre. Although Eros, however crippled and distorted, saves him, the way people are made to live unnatural lives is reflected in their sexual desires and relationships. Out of the hospital, he tries to follow his psychiatrist's advice and free himself from all dependencies, including emotional ones. The rule he broke – "no personal relations" – he tries to bend by separating sexual intercourse from love and calling it a transaction. Mark wants to experiment with Gary in terms of an interaction that is sexual but not personal.

Moreover, Mark's every other sentence is the therapy, its language, allegedly the language of understanding and tolerance, but which is, in truth, besides being ridiculous, the language drained of emotions. Fortunately, when Gary breaks down, Mark decides to abandon his experiment and follow his heart. He confesses to Gary:

I traded. I made money. Tic Tac. And when I made money I was happy, when I lost my money I was unhappy [...] But for so many years everything I've felt has been chemically induced [...] I mean, are there any feeling left, you know? I want to find out, want to know if there are any feelings left? (88)

Although Robbie's feelings, when instead of selling "pills of happiness" he gives them away for free, are also chemically induced, they are the feelings that should be preserved. But it is only without the use of drugs that they can become permanent. Robbie explains to Lulu this moment of deeper insight:

I felt good, I felt amazing, from just giving, you see? [...] It is important [...] Listen. This is the important bit. If you'd felt [...] I felt [...] I was looking down on this planet. Spaceman over this earth [...] And I see the suffering, And the wars. And the grab, grab, grab [...] And I think: Fuck money. Fuck it. This seling. This buying. This system. Fuck the bitching world and let's be [...] beautiful. Beautiful and happy. You see? You see? (89)

Unfortunately, Robbie's enthusiasm does not last long, and is about to be broken by a method similar to O'Brien's from the novel *1984*. Robbie has not only failed to sell, but he has committed an unpardonable sin of giving something for free. As it was Lulu's duty to get the job done, she is also to bear the consequences.

Having a strong motive, to survive, Robbie and Lulu finally make money by selling phone sex. At Lulu's question: "Why are there so many sad people in this world?" (90), Robbie does not care to answer any more. He only says: "we're making money [...] We're gonna be all right" (90). Later, when Lulu disconnects the phones, shaken by a call in which a youngish, "quite well spoken" guy told her that he was sexually aroused by watching a video in which a young female shop assistant is being stabbed to death, Robbie gets angry at her for stopping the flow of cash, because he wants to survive. At this point, Lulu finally admits to herself that she is not sure whether she wants to survive at any cost since she certainly does not want to live like that. What has additionally moved Lulu to such a reaction is the fact that she actually witnessed the scene from the video recorded by a security camera and was guilt ridden for not doing anything to help the girl, but thinking instead how she could walk away without paying for the chocolate bar. Apart from reminding her of her guilt, the phone call shocks Lulu into seeing the horror of social reality. Unfortunately, she still remains too weak to change the course of actions to follow.

The character that becomes the focus of the play is a fourteen-year-old Gary. All that Gary ever wanted was for someone to look after him. Instead, he had been raped by his stepfather for two years, two to three times a week, and when he finally went to a social worker for help, he was faced with a cold, emotionless bureaucrat, in the place of a human being.

The most frightening thing is that after a while we begin to perceive violence and injustice as something normal, even necessary and unavoidable. When Gary asked for help, the social worker's reaction was to provide him with a leaflet on the proper use of condom. Gary's voluntary death will come during one of his morbid masochistic fantasies of being watched over and raped. Through his attempt to save Gary, Mark proves that he has been quite resistant to the process of conversion; moreover, he offers Gary a choice: instead of prolonging the transaction attitude, instead of being treated like trash and hated, Gary can choose to be loved. Mark puts his arms around him hoping that he would like that, but Gary pushes him away. The following words spoken by Mark are a desperate cry which shows a perfectly clear understanding and awareness of the reason why we end up

in a vicious circle: "I'm just trying to show you. Because, I don't think that you have ever actually been loved and if the world has offered no practical [...]" (81).

This realization comes too late for Gary. The money he paid Lulu and Robbie for his murder will prove them ready to be initiated into Brian's world. In such conditions, Gary permanently loses his faith in love, which inevitably leads to the perversion of his needs. Feeling that his soul and body have suffered beyond recovery, he sees death as the only way out of his desperation. He chooses a terrible death that is symbolic of his abuse, to be raped by a knife. Robbie and Lulu both participate in the game of rape that would lead to Gary's death, but it is Mark, his lover, who does the deed.

To remain human or to survive is the dominant theme of Orwell's *1984* and Ravenhill's play, where the survival is always at the expense of others. Not only do Lulu and Robbie stay alive, by delivering to Brian the money Gary paid them for his murder, but they are also rewarded for perceiving no limits as to the means of making money. After revealing to Lulu, Robbie and Mark his fatherly wisdom that the true first words in the Bible are to get the money first, Brian makes them repeat that money is civilization and civilization is money, making it clear to them that it is money itself that should give meaning to their lives. What they need to do is produce money and thus ensure the future bliss of shopping and television to all mankind.

The trio had sinned beyond pardon by betraying what must not be betrayed, namely, love. For what they should have done, especially Mark, and what was the only sane thing to do, is to give love, to overwhelm Gary with love in spite of his insistence not to. Amidst Lulu's confusion, Robbie's jealousy, Mark's disappointment, and, in general, their weak spirit, love did not have enough space to prevail. Nevertheless, the final scene does show some optimism. Though Lulu, Robie and Mark were made to play by Brian's rules and repeat the words that define his ideology, they never accept it in their hearts. What is more, there is some hope that they still might be able to oppose it. This is implied in Mark's new version of the shopping story. The story appears three times in the play. The first time it appears as the story invented and often told by Mark to Lulu and Robbie to amuse them, and make them feel loved by him. Mark buys them in the supermarket from a sleazy fat man for twenty quid, and takes them home where they live happily ever after. The problem with this version is that they still define themselves in terms of owning and being owned. The second time, it becomes a horror story when it is modified to fulfil Gary's masochistic fantasy. The third version finally takes a positive turn where the bought one is set free. Outside the owning and being owned system, he has to find another way to survive and to live. After the story is told, Mark, Robbie and Lulu finally share food and take turns to feed each other.

The significance of the act of sharing the ready meal, which was described throughout the play as tasteless and individual, should be emphasized here. Individual meals are a direct proof that the world which proclaims itself as homogenized, the world in which people are brought together by means of mass media

and various modern forms of communication, is actually fragmented and characterized by a constantly growing sense of alienation. It is this sharing of what is specifically designed as not to be shareable which brings the three of them close together and emphasizes the importance of personal relations.

Faust (Faust is Dead)

Tzvetan Todorov, a literary critic, has referred to modern Western culture as Faustian. (Todorov 2003). His diagnosis has been confirmed by a number of contemporary playwrights who resort to the Faustian archetype to describe the combination of tremendous technological advancement and profound moral failure that characterizes our modernity.

In Ravenhill's version of *Doctor Faustus*, one of the most resonant of Marlowe's lines, "this is Hell, nor am I out of it", becomes a synonym for the life in the contemporary America – the world drained of feelings, steeped in consumerism, thoroughly controlled by mass media. It is to this Unreal City, where all reality is virtual, that the hero, the visiting French philosopher, feels properly at home. The author of the postmodern, anti-humanist work *The End of History and the Death of Man*, is a modern Faust, briefly enjoying his post mortem existence among the generation of numbed, disoriented American youth. One of them, Pete, is drawn to Alain by the latter's air of authority. As we follow them on their educational journey across America, we become aware of ironic reversals in relation to Marlowe's original. Marlowe's Faustus is in Hell because he has sold his soul to the Devil; Pete is ready to sell his own soul to escape the Hell he is trapped in. He is ready, that is, to compromise what integrity he has left in exchange for a direction he hopes to get from the older man. Instead of offering hope for guidance out of the inauthentic existence, Alain thrusts Pete deeper into it. Thus, although Pete does not really fit in the theory of multiple sexualities, propounded by his Alain, he is nevertheless seduced by his mentor. He is also instructed to accept his abuse as a transaction that will eventually guide him to spiritual illumination that Pete, beneath his pretended coolness, secretly covets. In the meantime, the boy is to watch what is happening through his camcorder, as a TV spectacle; in that way he will be spared not only the natural revulsion but any feelings whatsoever. The teacher's abuse of his disciple is thus not only a physical one. The rape of Pete's mind is suggestive of the kind of the verbal indoctrination to which the contemporary youth are subjected. The result is an obliteration of the natural emotional impulses and needs, and of pervasive confusion as to what one's sexual or any other identity is. Pete's quest for an adequate father figure thus involves a lot of experimentation, mistakes, suffering, but is not ultimately successful. Rejecting Alain's cruel nihilism, Pete ends by embracing the equally hopeless alternative – he returns to his biological father, a software magnate, and his solution to the problem of excessive structuring of the individual – which is electronically controlled chaos. He has created a program involving the use of the world's most famous masterpieces whose purpose is the very opposite of what

those works of art were meant to achieve – to keep one's perception as fragmentary and disconnected as possible, and thus eliminate all painful awareness of the kind of the world one lives in. While embracing this dispersed consciousness, Pete also, paradoxically, hopes to exchange the disc he has stolen from his father for a vast sum of money which will buy him something he has been denied all his life – new, “totally real experiences”.

Ravenhill is just one of many modern authors who criticize the American life style for its emotional atrophy and consumerism. This is how, for example, Adrienne Rich, a contemporary American poetess, describes the spiritual condition of contemporary American citizens:

We see daily that our lives are terrible and little, without continuity, buyable and saleable at any moment, mere blips on a screen, that this is the way we live now [...] We become stoical; we hibernate; we numb ourselves with chemicals; we emigrate internally into fictions of past and future; we thirst for guns; but *as a people* we have rarely, if ever, known what it is to tremble with fear, to lament, to rage, to praise, to solemnize, to say *We have done this, to our sorrow*; to say *Enough*; to say *We will*, to say *We will not*.

(Rich 1993: 20)

The only way to ‘recharge desire’ and ‘put numbed zones into feelings’ is, according to Rich, to ‘lay claim to poetry’, ‘to read and write as if your life depended on it’, which is, as a solution to the postmodern condition, totally disregarded by Ravenhill's heroes, though not by Ravenhill himself.

The use of Chorus represents one of the most important aspect of *Faust* (*Faust is Dead*) since, appearing at crucial points as in Marlowe's play, it provides an insight into the conditioning process whereby children, naturally endowed with moral perception, are turned into dehumanized, indifferent subjects. The earliest memory this collective voice recalls is of a seven-year-old boy who was crying night after night, because he intuitively sensed that the world is a bad place. Although his mother promised him that it will improve in time, the boy taught himself to cry in a special way that means she would not hear him ever again. The child evolves into a teenager who smashes the window of a store to get himself a VCR. His mother's reproach that he should have gone to the food store instead is totally illogical to the boy, because there is no point of having something to eat if you do not have anything to watch while eating it. The following stage of his development is overseen by the Minister of a local church, another dangerous surrogate father, who, deciding not to lag behind the modern tendencies, installs a terminal and modem in the church. The fact that mothers, who have raised the funds for the terminal, begin to lose their children to the Internet is explained by the Minister as one of the Lord's mysterious ways which leads towards a brighter future. For a moment, the Chorus also speaks in the voice of Donny, Pete's Internet friend, a disturbed boy, who cuts his flesh with a razor, the pain being the only way he has of feeling anything. When this way of proving to himself that he is

alive ultimately fails, he commits suicide. The Chorus speaking in Donny's voice recalls a childhood memory – gulping cherry slush from the slushie machine in the store where his mother worked. After the sudden removal of the machine, Donny developed symptoms of pathological aggression, first towards the teachers at school and then against his own body – he leaves bloody razor marks on his body, hoping that one day Jesus will explain why he does this to himself. Although Donny remains ignorant of the causes of this horrific act, Ravenhill, Rebellato writes, assures the readers that “cutting is a desperate way of making contact with reality, pain stimulating a body numbed by the delirium of consumer pseudo-choice and mediation on every level” (Rebellato 2001: xvi).

At the end of the play, the voice of the Chorus becomes the voice of the adult who is looking for the signs that the world is getting better, as mother promised it would, but perceives that the world has neither ended nor become better and discovers that he does not feel a thing about it:

It's just going on, on and on and on. And I wonder if I should feel something about that. But – you want the truth? – I don't feel a thing [...] And I wonder what made me that way. (137)

How capable the system is of neutralizing any attempt of authenticity is ultimately demonstrated by the fact that Donny's suicide, meant to be a kind of rebellion, is turned into a marketable commodity – his and Pete's idol, the rock star Stevie makes a song about Donny's suicide, and it is now showing three times an hour on MTV.

The play ends in another suicide – Alain's. He is first shot by Pete who has realized the importance of Alain's part in Donny's decision to kill himself. Horrified with the image of Donny's corpse, Pete fires at Alain which is the last thing he does before he finally returns to his father. Alain is, however, not dead, but seriously wounded. At the end of the play, he decides to refuse medical help and dies.

Ravenhill's rejection of post-modern hedonism, represented by Alain, can be compared to Erich Fromm's criticism of radical hedonism. Starting from a dilemma – to have or to be? – Fromm concedes that there is nothing wrong in determining happiness as the source of life; what is wrong is the definition of happiness as the satisfaction of any desire or subjective need a person may feel (*radical hedonism*), since, defined in that incomplete way, in contemporary society, based on the existential mode of having rather than being, it does not lead to harmony and peace but to egotism, selfishness and greed. As a consequence of people being conditioned to have only selfish and possessive desires, there appears an atrophy of emotional life: we become alienated both from ourselves and other human beings. Acts of cruelty take place not because people are driven by innate aggression, but because they no longer have or feel any emotional bond to other people. The way out, according to Fromm, of this state of “constant disequilibrium” is to achieve the unity of the fully developed human reason and love. By becoming fully human, “man will arrive at the experience of oneness [...] – one-

ness within man, oneness between man and nature, and oneness between man and other man” (Fromm 1977: 314). In this manner, which looks back to the teaching of Ficino, Mirandolla and Bruno, modern man might transcend his narcissistic position and “escape the hell of self-centredness and hence self-imprisonment” (Fromm 1977: 315).

Ravenhill’s characters, unfortunately, do not manage to escape the prisons of their selfish selves otherwise than by suicide. Yet, if we agree with Lionel Trilling, when he observes that death destroys the man, but the idea of death saves him from the omnipotence of culture, we might find in the way Donny and Alain voluntarily end their lives the final desperate affirmation of precisely those values their society systematically tries to deny them (see Trilling 2004: 265). If, as already noted, the impact of Donny’s suicide is neutralized by being turned into a TV show, Alain’s death, caused by the despair beneath his cruelty and hedonism, is a clear indication of his moral ascent beyond his real life prototypes, but equally too beyond his literary predecessor, Marlowe’s Faustus.

It did not escape the notice of critics that Ravenhill’s Alain, a French philosopher whose main ideas rest on the recognizable post-modern slogans of the death of man, the death of the real and the death of the progress, is actually an amalgam of the French philosophers Michael Foucault and Jean Baudrillard (Rebellato 2001: xiv). Significantly, the title of Alain’s book also refers to the postmodern anti-humanist orthodoxy; in fact, it is a reflection of Francis Fukuyama’s book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). In his book, Fukuyama proclaims that “what we may be witnessing nowadays [...] is the end of history: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (Fukuyama 1992). Thus Fukuyama celebrates the ‘American-style’ democracy as the only ‘correct’ political system that all other countries will only be happy to follow. Ravenhill, on the other hand, tells the truth.

* * *

Although the power to criticize and change the modern (consumer) society is marginal and limited as Ang suggests, it is still with the people. This is a common idea to both Fiske and Ravenhill. Fortunately, various contemporary artists share their opinion – Edward Bond, another contemporary playwright, being one of them. Here is the quote from his study *The Hidden Plot: Notes on Theatre and the State* (2000):

We begin to lose our humanity. The affluent utopia becomes a prison. In earlier times stories of gods and demons related their people to their world in a more human way than our supermarkets and machines relate us to ours [...] Once the story related the community to the world. But the consumer consumes alone. Our democracy sustains itself by systematically de-democratizing its people [...] The economy grows, the means of material well-

being and happiness increase – yet socially we are sicker. Our affluence is a higher form of poverty. In the past the story searched for truth, now we search for lies. And so our angst will turn into terror and escapades of sickening communal violence [...] Western democracy has become a secret Culture of Death. Instead of speaking human language we chant alchemical spells and arm our magic with terrors of gigantesque technology... What has been called the End of History is really the vanishing of the Future. Post-modernism means that we have begun to live in the past. The roaring of our media is like the sound of dinosaurs. Every species before it becomes extinct enters into a space of post-modernism [...] We are armed with weapons so powerful that peace brings us the dangers of war, our media tells us of distant disasters to distract us from dealing with our own, our democracy cannot define freedom for us, our politicians do not understand what they are doing, our children walk away from us. (Bond 2000: 4)

In order to resist the influence of the destructive society ('a secret Culture of Death'), Bond implies that we are supposed to go back to the roots – to discover and relearn the art of loving, the way some of Ravenhill's characters do. Although it is a small step, it is still a step forward.

References

- Ang, Ien (1990) 'Culture and Communication: Toward an Ethnographic Critique of Media Consumption in the Transnational Media realm'. *European Journal of Communications* 5, 239–60.
- Bond, Edward (2000) *The Hidden Plot: Notes on Theatre and the State*. London: Methuen.
- Fiske, John (1989) *Reading the Popular*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Fromm, Erich (1977) *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books.
- Fukuyama, Francis (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.
- Ravenhill, Mark (2001) *Plays*. London: Methuen Drama.
- Rebellato, Dan (2001) *Introduction to Mark Ravenhill's Plays*. London: Methuen Drama.
- Rich, Adrienne (1993) *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*. New York: Norton and Company.
- Trilling, Lionel (2004) 'Freud: Within and Beyond Culture'. In: Petrovic, Lena (ed.) *Literature, Culture, Identity: Introducing XX Century Literary Theory*. Nis: Prosveta.
- Todorov, Tzvetan (2003) *Nesavršeni vrt*. Beograd: Geopoetika.

Milena Kostić is a teaching assistant at the Faculty of Philosophy, English Department, in Niš, Serbia. She defended her MA thesis – *The Faustian Motif in the Tragedies of Christopher Marlowe* – in March 2009, and is currently working on her PhD thesis. Her interests comprise the variety of academic fields: Canadian Studies, British Studies, Medieval and Renaissance English Literature, etc.

Address: Milena Kostić, MA, Bubanjski heroji 60/6, 18000 Nis, Serbia. [e-mail: mkostic76@gmail.com]