The Role of Marginalia in Douglas Coupland's *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*

IRINA AVERIANOVA

Abstract

This article presents the analysis of lexical, semantic and functional characteristics of neologisms, or new words, coined by one of the prominent modern writers Douglas Coupland in his groundbreaking novel Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture *(1991). These neologisms, set as a marginal glossary along the main text of the novel, have multiple functions, the major of which is the creation of a comprehensive socio-cultural framework for the understanding of American youth culture at the end of the 20th century.*

Douglas Coupland and his novels present a peculiar niche in the American literature of the 90s. On the one hand, his debut novel *Generation X* has immediately become a cult read among young people, while its author unanimously received the title of "the Generation X messiah" and "the high priest of 'zeitgeist'"[1]. The book instantly became an international bestseller, and 60,000 copies of it were sold in the United States alone. *Generation X* was the term coined by Coupland to refer to the four-year cohort of Americans born between 1961 and 1964, those "who are tired of hearing themselves called 'baby boomers' when they know they don't carry the usual hippie-cum-yuppie baggage" (Howe & Strauss 1993, 12). Like *Generation X*, many other original coinages introduced in Coupland's first novel have quickly become the popular vernacular, while their author has earned the reputation of "a brilliant wordsmith". *Generation X,* followed shortly by other popular books (*Shampoo Planet* 1992, *Life after God* 1994, *Microserfs* 1995, and others) absorbed many cultural, literary and aesthetic tendencies of that time and reflected the profound social processes taking place in the midst of the post-industrial society, particularly within its youth subcultures.

On the other hand, in spite of the immense popularity of Coupland's prose it is surprising that the linguistic and structural experiments and innovations that the author demonstrates in *Generation X* and other novels have not yet attracted any noticeable scholarly attention. While social and cultural significance of his work has always been the object of the diverse and contradictory criticism, Coupland's critics do not go further beyond the general appreciation of his vocabulary. Thus, many reviewers emphasize that, being a professional journalist, Coupland hears and successfully renders "the obvious sounds of a dialogue" (Bloom 1994, 80). Canadian critic Pugsley (1994) believes that the linguistic innovations of Coupland are "worth citing as true codifications of the spirit of his time" (44). Finally, in his praise of the author's literary achievement, Brockington (1996) also states that *Generation X,* due to its extensive glossary, sooner reminds us of lexicographic notes and sociological research, rather than a work of fiction.

The novel, which brought Coupland notoriety as the first biographer of Generation X, describes the

---

[1] Zeitgeist (Ger.) - the spirit of the time; the taste and outlook characteristic of a period or generation.

life of three young people who escape to a small Californian town Palm Springs, away from so-called "normal life" with its indispensable attributes (careers, marriages, families, the shallow culture of unlimited consumerism, and the like) and from all those who welcome and crave these "pseudo-values" of post-industrial society. The protagonists, as representatives of Generation X, or Xers, are disappointed and bitter, they are too realistic and perceive too acutely the emptiness and hypocrisy of all political, economic, social, cultural, and even sexual "opportunities," offered by materialist society, so wish not to be a part of it. "These are Coupland's twentysomething 'Xers'," - acknowledge Howe and Strauss, - "who have suffered the most from the betrayed expectations of the youth world that went from sweet to sour as they approached it. They are also the 13ers[2] most impeded, and angered, by Boomers" (1993, 14).

The novel is built as a frame narrative, where the main story is composed of a set of shorter stories, narrated by main characters, whose major occupation in-between meaningless and low-paid part-time jobs (*McJobs*) is story-telling. Their stories about real and imaginary events and experiences create a fictitious, isolated world, which becomes the quintessence of the characters' existence, into which they further escape from real life. This life, however, is never far away from the characters and serves as a constant object of their criticism and as justification for their escapism. The main line of narrative goes parallel to the marginal glossary of 95 main concepts, compiling the philosophy of Xers. Thanks to the characters' stories about their life and assessment of their place in it, and, to a great degree, due to the accompanying glossary, the novel presents a valid account of the generation, which would have remained a mystery if Coupland hadn't helped "elders take the trouble to block out the iconography and look more discerningly at the young men and women in daily American life" (Howe & Strauss 1993, 9).

Compositionally, Coupland's glosses are set on the periphery of the main narration, on the specially assigned-for-the purpose non-standard, extra-wide margins. Besides 32 words and 64 word combinations, denoting key concepts of X culture, marginal annotations also contain Coupland's drawings and sketches of people and things from the novel, as well as slogans and aphorisms reflecting the specific vision of the world by the characters and their attitude towards mainstream society. Even without reading the main text of the novel, the reader can acquire a sufficient idea about a new "lost" generation of young people, who are deeply concerned about the state of the world and modern society and who deride it in their bitter, sharp, and sarcastic argot.

The morphological analysis of the new words created by the author displays various derivational patterns and testifies to Coupland's remarkable word-building ability. Many of neologisms are formed by means of word derivation, adding productive suffixes and/or prefixes to the existing word bases: *bradyism, brazilification, armanism, anti-sabbatical, emallgration, bambification.* Numerals can also serve as a word base: *2 + 2 = 5 − ism, 101 − ism.* Word composition, or compounding, combining several word bases into one word, accounts for the following neologisms: *chryptotechnophobia, down-nesting, ethnomagnetism,* and others. Word-combinations, or phrases, comprise the majority of new coinages; sometimes compounding is also combined with derivation: *legislated nostalgia, dumpster clocking, Dorian Graying, decade blending, derision preemption, knee-jerk irony* and so on. An interesting device is a partial transformation of set-phrases, *such as the emperor's new mall* (transformed *emperor's new clothes*) and *"bread and circuits"* (*"The electronic era tendency to view party politics as corny - no longer relevant or meaningful or useful to modern societal issues, and in many cases dangerous"*), a transformation of the idiom *"bread and circus"*. Witty, ingenious, and original, these neologisms were immediately endorsed by the grateful fans and some of them, such as *Generation X, McJobs* and others, are still in active usage. The complete

---

[2] Neil Howe & Bill Strauss, in their extensive sociological study *The 13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?* (1993), consider Generation X to be the first cohort of what they call the 13th generation of Americans "to know the American nation, flag, and Constitution" (17).

list of all marginal neologisms from *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* can be found on the Internet (http://www.scn.org/~jonny/genx.html).

Semantically, Coupland's marginal neologisms fall into several thematic clusters, such as "family," "job," "fashion," "mass culture," and others. It is not surprising that the key social and cultural concepts, which attract major attention and criticism from the protagonists, comprise the most extensive and developed thematic fields. Thus, the thematic field of "family" includes such notions as *down-nesting* (*"The tendency of parents to move to smaller, guest-room-free houses after their children have moved away so as to avoid children aged 20 to 30 who have boomeranged home"*), *strangelove reproduction* (*"Having children to make up for the fact that one no longer believes in the future"*), *Pull-the-Plug, Slice the Pie* (*"A fantasy in which an offspring mentally tallies up the net worth of his parents"*), *Safety Net-ism* (*"The belief that there will always be a financial and emotional safety net to buffer life's hurts. Usually parents"*), *divorce assumption* (*"A form of Safety Net-ism, the belief that if marriage doesn't work out, then there is no problem because partners can simply seek a divorce"*) and so on.

Another major concern of Xers is the environment, and many of their gloomy tales are about radioactive wastelands and nuclear apocalypses. These are accompanied by the following marginal glosses: *chryptotechnophobia* (*"The secret belief that technology is more of a menace than a boon"*), *survivalousness* (*"The tendency to visualize oneself enjoying being the last person on earth"*), *mental Ground Zero* (*"The location where one visualizes oneself during the dropping of the atomic bomb; frequently, a shopping mall"*).

The culture of senseless consumerism, built around endless, identical shopping malls, is perceived by the characters as one of the main contributors to the deterioration of the environment, so it gets its fare share of deriding neologisms: *The Emperor's New Mall* (*"The popular notion that shopping malls exist on the insides only and have no exterior. The suspension of visual belief engendered by this notion allows shoppers to pretend that the large, cement blocks thrust into their environment do not, in fact, exist"*), *dumpster clocking* (*"The tendency when looking at objects to guesstimate the amount of time they will take to eventually decompose: 'Ski boots are the worst. Solid plastic. They'll be around till the sun goes supernova'"*).

Different aspects of contemporary mass culture are also objects of rejection and sarcasm, which are reflected in an equally extensive field of original coinages. Among them are: *bambification* (*"The mental conversion of flesh-and-blood, living creatures into cartoon creatures possessing bourgeois, Judeo-Christian attitudes and morals"*), *celebrity schadenfreude* (*"Lurid thrills derived from talking about celebrity deaths"*), *obscurism* (*"The practice of peppering daily life with obscure references ((forgotten films, dead TV stars, unpopular books, defunct countries, etc.)) as a subliminal means of showcasing one's education and one's wish to disassociate from the world of mass culture"*), *tele-parabolizing* (*"Morals used in everyday life that derive from TV sitcom plots: 'That's just like the episode where Jan lost her glasses'"*) and many others.

The conflict between generations, which forms the leitmotiv of the novel and which allows Brockington to call *Generation X* "an extreme manifesto of intergenerational warfare" (1996, 2) accounts for numerous popular neologisms in the novel. Within the system of three generational subcultures described in the book – baby-boomers, yuppies, and Generation X – the latter perceives itself as the most deceived and deprived. Unlike their parents, children of demographic and economic boom, Generation X entered their adulthood during extreme budget deficit and economic decline, which inevitably resulted in unprecedented numbers of abortions and suicides, divorces among parents, incurable diseases (AIDS) and escalating ecological disaster (Howe & Strauss 1993). Their tragic "inheritance" prompted Howe and Strauss to call the generational group, to which Xers belong, "the 13th Generation," paring the chronological order of this age cohort with all negative implications of the ill-fated number. Generation X feels inopportune and hapless

by birth, and Coupland renders this mood of anger at their undeserved social and material deprivation in such terms as *boomer envy, homeowner envy, green division* (the knowledge of *the difference between envy and jealousy"*), *brazilification* (*"The widening gulf between the rich and the poor and the accompanying disappearance of the middle classes"*), *poorochondria* (*"Hypochondria derived from not having medical insurance"*), *lessness* (*"A philosophy whereby one reconciles oneself with diminishing expectations of material wealth"*) and numerous others.

Even more aggressively Generation X castigates their other adversary, the subgroup of yuppies, who fanatically, at any cost, strive to climb up the social ladder and cut their niche in the complex hierarchy of wealth distribution. Such people are characterized by *armanism* (*"An obsession with mimicking the seamless and (more importantly) controlled ethos of Italian culture"*), *architectural indigestion* (*"The almost obsessive need to live in a 'cool' architectural environment*), *café minimalism* (*"To espouse a philosophy of minimalism without actually putting into practice any of its tenets"*) and other similar traits.

Naturally, the most extensive and developed thematic field is composed of marginal glosses referring to Generation X itself. With surgical precision and impartiality, Coupland cuts away the outer, superficial layers of their pretentious culture and philosophy (*conspicuous minimalism, conversational slumming, nutritional slumming, recreational slumming, status substitution* and so on) and exposes the deep, bleeding wounds of the "lost" generation. The most serious of these is their profound depression in the form of a mid–twenties breakdown, *"a period of mental collapse occurring in one's twenties, often caused by an inability to function outside of school or structured environments coupled with a realization of one's aloneness in the world,"* which is often marked by *"the induction into the ritual of pharmaceutical usage"* . Failure to find an adequate place in life and unwillingness to fit into conventional social stereotypes make Xers denounce professional careers and engage in "low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future" *McJobs* or temporary, *anti-sabbatical* jobs, which, in their turn, result in *ozmosis,* or inability to *"live up to one's self-image"* . This occupational phenomenon, aggravated by *"fears about the future"* , is called in the book *overboarding,* or *"plunging headlong into a job or life-style seemingly unrelated to one's previous interests"* . In general, people of Generation X display multiple psychological problems of adjustment to their unconventional way of life and, induced by this adjustment, specific behavioral patterns, which are carefully documented by Coupland in his marginal glossary. The most idiosyncratic among them are the tendency to hide their lack of material values behind a façade of intellectual ones (*status substitution*), the fear that career success might interfere with one's personal, especially childish, needs (*successophobia*), refusal to show one's real emotions to avoid mockery from peers (*derision preemption*), and finally, ultimate passivity, *option paralysis, "the tendency, when given unlimited choices, to make none"* .

As can be seen from the examples above, the marginal glossary of the Generation X presents a detailed and comprehensive portrait of the specific youth culture and its milieu, which significantly supports and enriches the depiction of Xers in the main text of the novel. Compositionally, such narrative arrangement reminds us of the structure of a printed hypertext, with its intertextual links and options for non-linear reading. But unlike authentic electronic hypertext, a specific text structure composed of textual blocks, connected by electronic links to each other or to other textual or multimedia (video, audio, animation) systems or their components, in a printed text this interconnectivity is rather conventional. The blocks of the main and marginal text and visual information, such as illustrations, are linked either explicitly (marked as footnotes or placed within immediate proximity on the same page) or implicitly (semantically connected by a common theme or topic) with the main narrative. Functionally such textual structure is similar to the hypertext cross-referencing used in electronic encyclopedias, dictionaries, textbooks and other reference literature. Since the links between textual blocks, or lexia, in printed texts are not marked, unlike hyperlinks in electronic text, it is more feasible to treat such texts as "cybertexts", non-linear narrative structures, where information strings are embedded in the text and require from the reader the selective movement of

choosing the order of reading (Aarseth 1997).

The typological problem of qualifying *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* as a hypertext or cybertext requires more detailed consideration of the characteristics of these types of narrative and lies beyond the scope of this article. For the purposes of the analysis of the functional and structural role of marginalia in Coupland's novel it seems plausible to accept its certain analogy with a hypertext in Nelson's definition[3] and Landow's (1997) broad and comprehensive treatment of this textual structure as "an information medium that links verbal and nonverbal information (3).

Thus, from the content perspective, the introduction of the marginal component of the novel, composed of verbal and visual blocks, allows Coupland to achieve the hypertextual effect of the encyclopedic expansion of the main story by supplying background details and illustrations. From the point of view of structure, the novel allows certain multisequential readings, presenting the reader with choices of how to read it. Most of the marginal glosses are not included in the text of the main narrative but often are cross-referenced to it through a key word. For instance, *historical overdosing* and *historical underdosing* (*"living in the period of life when, relatively, too much or nothing seems to happen"*) accompany on the margins the image of *history poisoning* of wheat in one of the protagonists' stories about a Russian farmer whose crops were ruthlessly burnt by the sun. In other cases, more distant contextual or/and thematic associations can be enacted between the main and marginal texts if the reader chooses to alternatively switch between them. An example of such cross-referencing is the marginal gloss *Emotional Ketchup Burst* (*"The bottling up opinions and emotions inside oneself so that they explosively burst forth all at once, shocking and confusing employers and friends -- most of whom thought things were fine"*), which is placed parallel to the story of another protagonist suddenly quitting his job.

A lexico-semantic group of neologisms, denoting different subgroups of Generation X, the primary object of author's attention in the novel, maintains the closest correlation with the main text. Thus, the central protagonist's story about his brothers and sisters and their life-styles is accompanied on the margins by introduction of two typical subgroups of Xers. These are *Black Holes, "best known for their possession of almost entirely black wardrobes"* and *Squires, "the most common X Generation subgroup and the only subgroup given to breeding"*. The former live in *Black Dens* (*"often unheated warehouses with Day-Glo spray paint, mutilated mannequins, Elvis references, dozens of overflowing ashtrays, broken mirror sculptures, and Velvet Underground music playing in background"*), while the latter *"exist almost exclusively in couples and are recognizable by their frantic attempts to recreate a semblance of Eisenhower-era plenitude in their daily lives in the face of exorbitant housing prices and two-job life-styles. Squires tend to be continually exhausted from voraciously acquisitive pursuit of furniture and bureaucracy knickknacks"*. The story of another character about his attempt to escape from society and seek refuge in the nihilistic youth *Basement Subculture* is supported on the margins by the description of another subgroup, *Earth Tones,* who are *"interested in vegetarianism, tie-dyed outfits, mild recreational drugs, and good stereo equipment. Earnest, frequently lacking in humor"*. Finally, the appearance in the story of a second-plan character, rejected by Xers for his yuppie views, thematically and contextually corresponds with the marginal gloss *Yuppie Wannabe's* (*"An X Generation subgroup that believes the myth of a yuppie life-style being both satisfying and viable. Tend to be high in debt, involved in some form of substance abuse, and show a willingness to talk about Armageddon after three drinks"*).

Besides expanding the central narrative to the range of a mini-encyclopedia of a specific socio-cultural stratum, Coupland's marginal glosses perform another important stylistic function. As a separate entity, they present a new, unique argot, comprehensible only to the representatives of the given marginal subcul-

---

[3] "By 'hypertext' I mean non-sequential writing - text that branches and allows choices to the reader" (Nelson 1981,0/2, cited in Landow 1997,3).

ture and facilitating their withdrawal and isolation from the mainstream, dominant mass culture. Like any argot, this lingo fulfills a collective identity function, based on a special shared knowledge within the given social milieu. A similar device is used by Coupland in his later novel *Microserfs* (1995), dedicated to yet another peripheral social group of American youth of the 90's, highly intellectual, but socially deprived "slaves" of electronic industry. This method of using non-standard lexicon in describing youth subcultures can be observed in other novels with a similar focus (W. Gibson, G. Malkani, etc.), which allows us to consider it as a common typological feature of postmodern texts dedicated to marginal societies.

While performing this typological function, the use of neologisms in *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture,* however, significantly deviates from the above mentioned texts in the author's intentional demystifying of the subculture's argot. Coupland assumes the role of a thorough lexicographer, providing each new word with a detailed explanation, worded in the formal scientific style of a dictionary definition, thereby ascertaining and authenticating the objectivity of information. These definitions comprising neutral and bookish vocabulary are in evident contrast with the notions or phenomena, denoted by the words or word combinations they define, for example: *"Voter's Block: The attempt, however futile, to register dissent with the current political system by simply not voting"* or *"Fame-Induced Apathy: The attitude that no activity is worth pursuing unless one can become very famous pursuing it. Fame-Induced Apathy mimics laziness, but its roots are much deeper"* . This contrast between the form and content of marginal glosses creates powerful ironic and satirical effect, which reveals the author's critical appraisal of certain aspects of Generation X's philosophy and way of life.

To conclude, it is possible to state that thanks to the technique of montage, assembling commentary, pictures, new terms and their definitions into a colorful pastiche, which serves as illustration and accompaniment to the main text of the novel, Coupland creates a saturated and extensive socio-cultural context of *Generation X* . The marginal glossary alone can provide the reader with a very comprehensive notion about the new youth culture. The hypertextual principle of the novel's composition affords conventional correlation and cross-referencing between the main and marginal texts, thus allowing the reader a certain freedom of choice in how the book can be read. Though peripheral in its function and position to the principal story, the marginal glossary not only expands and enriches the traditional linear narrative of the novel, but also presents a unique linguistic and aesthetic phenomenon in itself. Thanks to the way it represents a generic lexicon of Xers and reflects their culture and philosophy, one can hardly overestimate the role the marginal glossary has played in the international appreciation of the novel as the manifesto of Generation X and the unanimous recognition of the author as its spokesman.

References

Aarseth, E. J. (1997). *Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University
        Press.

Bloom, J. (1994). A review of *"Life after God". The New Criterion,* 12 (8), 79-80.

Brockington, M. (1996). Five short years - half a decade of Douglas Coupland. *The Vancouver Review,* Fall Issue, 2.

Coupland, D. (1991). *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture.* New York: HarperCollins.

Howe, N. & Strauss, B. (1993). *13ᵗʰ Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?* New York: Vintage Books.

Landow, G. P. (1997). *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology.* Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Pugsley, A. (1994). Postcards from Doug. *Canadian Forum,* 25 (June), 44-45.