
Microserfs: Slaves, Rebels and the Search for Identity

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Introduction

Traditionally, the mainstream literary criticism has treated Canadian literature to some extent as a part of the North-American conglomerate, which explains frequent reference to such famous Canadian writers as Saul Bellow, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro and others as “American.” Recently, however, literary research and criticism have focused on the national specifics of Canadian literature, paying more attention to the cultural distinction and peculiar ways the Canadian writers perceive and express their national identity.

In this respect, growing attention is directed towards the works of the famous Anglo-Canadian writer Douglas Coupland (born in 1961), whose debut novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1990) 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, p. 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 by Coupland (*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 (Averianova, 2010; Polishko, 2007).

However, in spite of the immense popularity of Coupland’s prose, the social and cultural significance of his work did not attract any noticeable scholarly attention for many years. Most of Coupland’s critics did not go beyond the general appreciation of his vocabulary (Averianova, 2010). Thus, many reviewers emphasized that, being a professional journalist, Coupland hears and successfully renders “the obvious sounds of a dialogue” (Bloom, 1994, p. 80). Canadian critic Pugsley (1994) believes that the linguistic innovations of Coupland are “worth citing as true codifications of the spirit of his time” (p. 44). Finally, in his praise of the author’s literary achievement, Brockington (1996) also states that *Generation X*, due to its extensive glossary, reminds us more of lexicographic notes and sociological research than a work of fiction.

In recent years this somewhat superficial attitude to Coupland has changed, and currently academic literary circles embrace the author and his writings as an embodiment of the best Canadian literary traditions and original innovations typical of the post-modern novel. The first critic to appreciate Coupland as

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

a prominent Canadian writer was B. Fawcett, who very soon after Coupland's debut proclaimed him to be a guiding literary beacon of the future (1992, p. 44). Eventually more and more critics have started focusing on Coupland's literary activity and placing it in the core of the formation of the exclusively Canadian narrative (McCampbel, 2010; Tate, 2007). Furthermore, if with *Generation X* Coupland was credited with the creation of a comprehensive socio-cultural framework for understanding American youth culture at the end of the 20th century (Howe & Strauss, 1993), now critics associate his works with the search for modern Canadian national identity (Skinazi, 2005).

One of Coupland's novels, *Microserfs* (1995) perfectly fits into this conceptualization, even though its protagonists are not Canadian by birth, like the characters of *Generation X*. However, in the perspective of certain unique socio-cultural characteristics of Canada, the book may be perceived as a transformed description of a society ruled by "garrison" mentality, which is believed to have affected the formation of the Canadian national identity. This paper will attempt to look at the text of the novel through the lenses of its relevance to the above-mentioned "garrison" mentality and analyze the ways of its artistic representation.

Living in the "Edge City"

The so-called digital/network revolution of the nineties, with its rapid growth of computer technologies and the Internet, has radically changed the way people live, work and communicate and how they perceive their individuality in the context of electronic globalization. True to his reputation of the zeitgeist, Douglas Coupland instantly became conscious of this transformation and reflected his vision of these changes in the novel *Microserfs*, published in 1995. In it, he switched his attention to a new youth subculture, younger "brothers" of Xers, the generation of young employees of computer super-giants like Microsoft and Apple. As Coupland admitted in one interview, at some point he realized that "90 per cent of people in the States now work directly around a PC. That's like a billion person-hours a day spent, and yet none of the stories we tell, or the books we write, take place in an office. There's just so much of the human soul and imagination in that strange environment now. I'm amazed we don't see 50 books a week on office life" (Johnstone, 1998).

Set in the early 1990s, the epistolary novel *Microserfs* captures the state of technology before Windows-95 and predicts the dot-com bubble of the late 1990s. The narrator, Daniel Underwood, who at his 26 years is going through identity crisis, on one of many sleepless nights, starts writing a journal trying to see "the patterns" in his life. "From this, -he writes, -I hope to establish what my problem is – and then, hopefully, solve it. I'm trying to feel more well adjusted than I really am, which is, I guess, the human condition. My life is lived day to day, one line of bug-free code at a time" (Coupland, 1995, p. 4²). In his PC-generated diary, Daniel relates in much detail how he and his friends, young (26–30-year-old) employees of Microsoft, drag through their daily serfdom, round-the-clock coding, testing and bug-fighting under the relentless control of the omnipresent Lord/God/Father Bill. They all live in Microsoft group houses only a few miles away from the company campus, and their "universe consists of home, Microsoft, and Costco" (p. 3). The narrow confinement of their lives strongly reminds us of a type of society, which, in other contexts, has been identified as "the edge city" or "a garrison."

The notion of the "edge city" belongs to the Canadian journalist Jean-Francois Leroux (2004), who was the first to explore the artificial settlements built for their employees by giant computer corporations, like Microsoft. Being the accumulation of computer geniuses, "hair-trigger geeks" and "rich nerds" (p. 2), they have become the nucleus of the computer industry and suffocating corrals for people who live there. And "live" is probably not an appropriate word in this context, since living in group houses, according to

2 Henceforce, the quotations from the book are indicated by page numbers only.

Daniel, is like “admitting you’re deficient in the having-a-life department,” as all they do is “work, sleep, work, sleep, work, sleep” (p. 4). Gradually realizing the absurdity and cruelty of their existence Dan and his friends, Todd, Susan, Bug Barbecue and Karla, face a vital decision: either remain in their well-paid exhausting jobs with Microsoft or follow the dream of Michael, the most gifted programmer of the group and their leader, who wants to create his own program and start his own company. With Dan’s father (who got deeply depressed after having been fired by IBM after many years of loyal service) becoming the first employee of Michael’s new company, they choose the latter. Down in California, in the Silicone Valley, their life turns for the better – they are more open for communication, start new friendships and fall in love – but they are still a very tightly-knit “garrison,” sharing a similar life style, activities and mentality.

The Garrison Mentality and Its Role in the Formation of Canadian Identity

Though neither “the edge city,” nor “garrison” has been used in the novel, the image of an isolated locus, in which the characters of *Microserfs* function, allows Coupland’s text to render a type of society ruled by the garrison mentality. This sort of mentality has been identified by N. Frye (2011), who believes it to be instrumental in the formation of the Canadian national identity. The history of the Canadian exploration and settlement is actually a history of building garrisons, starting from the early colonization of Quebec and Ontario territories. According to Frye, garrisons are a certain type of community, where people living on a restricted territory are closely connected by certain moral laws and united by the idea of survival. An individual may leave the community but this act will be perceived as treason.

L. Mijan and B. Cooper (2005) also associate the Canadian national identity with garrison mentality; moreover, they point to its anti-American nature. The latter is expressed by the majority of Canadians emphasizing the uniqueness of their culture and character, while being traditionally critical of everything typically American. Among mostly criticized “American values” is open pragmatism, mercantilism, addiction to competition, and such. While pointing to the lack of a serious comparative Canadian-American analysis in modern literary criticism, another Canadian critic K. A. Roberts (2013) also states that the existing inquiry is faulty of the frequent pitfalls of dichotomies.

Interestingly enough, Roberts perceives a common denominator of many Canadian literary works in the idea of a “cabin,” isolated “dwelling, off on its own.” Exactly the same metaphor appears at the beginning of *Microserfs*, when Daniel describes the place where they all live as giving him “a lost alpine ski-cabin feel” (p. 4). According to Roberts, the Canadian literature is vastly built on various individual ideas of the West: “Many of these Wests are common in their stubborn separateness: each West a kind of cabin, insistent that it is no other sort of dwelling whatsoever” (2013). At the same time, national myth and the Canadian imaginary are embodied in the metaphor of “travelling rain,” which emphasizes a pattern of connectedness (Ricou, cited in Roberts, 2013) between all those individual Wests. This imagery comes very close to the concept of a “garrison,” defining, as was claimed by Frye, the Canadian national identity.

The Garrison Mentality of *Microserfs*

It is not known whether Coupland was aware of the garrison mentality concept, but the way the protagonists of *Microserfs* live and communicate definitely replicates the imaginary of a garrison. The geographic seclusion of their existence within the boundaries of Microsoft, Costco and home was mentioned above and fits into what a critic Jimmy Long called “urban tribe” (2004). The tribal characteristics of such a community, according to Long, include loyalty to their company, identity of daily routines and rituals, and clear-cut role distribution.

In the Microsoft community, everything matches the above description. Furthermore, the factor that

makes this tribe similar to “garrison” is the omnipresence of their commander, Bill, whose presence, “semi-visible, at all times,” and “like mist,” is floating over their Campus. He is akin to a species from virtual reality: nobody has seen him (he communicates with his employees by e-mail), but everybody knows him, moreover, chants prayers to him: “Bill’s so smart. Bill is wise. Bill is kind. Bill is benevolent. Bill, Be My Friend . . . *Please!*” (p. 1). The image of Bill strongly associates with the image of Orwell’s Big Brother, but in the Microserfs’ perception, the former is much more powerful and influential: “Bill is a moral force, a spectral force, a force that shapes, a force that molds” (p. 3). To a certain extent, if we look at Bill through the lenses of the Canadian mentality, the image of the virtually omnipresent big boss of an American company can be perceived as an allegory of a commanding colonizer cruelly exploiting his serfs from the neighborhood.

Microserfdoom, yet another of the brilliantly innovative Coupland’s word-coinages, is a common feature uniting all major protagonists of the novel, the employees of Microsoft company. Socially isolated programmers are striving to find their place between the left-behind real world and a new, artificial world of information technologies, which has totally enslaved them. In this attempt, they “try to fake having life” dragging into their new environment sad remnants of former lives, like never-used kayaks, collecting dust in their garages. In their new life, they don’t do sports anymore, developing “weird” relationship with their bodies: “I feel like my body is a station wagon in which I drive my brain around” (p. 4). As a metaphor of their sad, lifeless life there is a flat of purple petunias in front of their house, “Susan’s one attempt at prettification,” which has long-expired from neglect and now gets Microserfs depressed every morning when they leave for work. The young people acutely realize that there is another world, which exists beyond the boundaries of their “edge city” and they strive to be a part of it, but never can - because of those boundaries, which they are unable to leave. For their existence to be complete they need to belong to both worlds, an unrealistic dream typical of the Canadian mentality.

Dan’s narration builds up an accurate likeness of a garrison dwelling. They all shop at Costco supermarket or order their products by catalogues from a trendy Tandy company (“I think we’d order our lives via 1-800 numbers if we could,” p. 8). Their main interests are focused on performing well (for the virtual approval of Bill), shipping products on time and competing against their rivals, by hating (fearing) them and researching (investigating) everything about them – just like the pioneers on the wilderness fore posts. For instance, Daniel is focused on Apple, while Susan is “an IBM brat and hates the company with passion” (p. 9). At the same time they all share their undisputable loyalty to their “commander” and their “garrison,” Microsoft. Their common “garrison” philosophy is well expressed by Susan: “We’re doing this for the good of society.” And Dan sides with her by stating: “It’s always been us taking an intellectual pride in putting out a good product – and making up money. . . . That sums up most of the Microsoft people I know” (p. 9).

In the postmodern technologically advanced society, “time and space are compressed,” generating a new type of milieu, a certain “mediascape,” a convergence of global electronic communication networks, which disrupt and annihilate national, economic and social borders (Cope, 1999). Personal or national identity is out of place in mediascape. Microserfs are acutely aware of these two concepts – time and individuality – disappearing from their garrison existence. Dan, for instance, started noticing that all conversations lately reached the point where everybody says “they don’t have any *time* anymore. How can time just . . . *disappear?*” (p. 146). When he shared his concern with his girlfriend and colleague Karla, she said she noticed that too. Moreover, she also remarked that everybody was beginning to look the same: “Everybody looks so gappy and identical. . . . Everybody looks the same nowadays because nobody has the *time* to differentiate themselves – or to even shop” (ibid.).

Virtual communication and interactivity have also replaced, for the most part, real natural human interaction and have become another important characteristic of Microserfs’ garrison life in the edge city. The

principal way of their communication with each other, even while sitting in the same or adjacent room, is by e-mail. It is noteworthy that at the beginning of the novel Daniel Underwood introduces himself by his e-mail address: “I am danielu@microsoft.com.” Being at the forefront of this communication technology, Microserfs cannot but get absorbed by it: “Everybody at Microsoft is an [e-mail] addict. The future of e-mail usage is being pioneered right here” (p. 21). Their preference of this form of communication is also based on the programmers’ avoidance of communication per se and an attempt to reinforce the walls isolating them from the outside world. Daniel is quite straightforward about this self-isolationism: “The cool thing with e-mail is that when you send it, there’s no possibility of connecting with the person on the other end. It’s better than phone answering machines, because with them, the person on the other line might actually pick up the phone and you might have to talk” (p. 22).

The protagonists are in constant e-mail communication with each other, and the novel is full of various instances of their correspondence. All of such texts, to a different degree, comply with conventions of electronic writing, or electronic discourse, such as careless spelling and punctuation, and expression of emphasis by means of non-normative typography (Averianova, 2009). Such linguistic relaxation, which accounts for these features, varies with different characters, some of who, like Daniel, are more consistent with the rules of normative writing, while others, like Dan’s e-mail pal Abe, are much more casual about their e-mails: “If you feed catfish nothing but left-over grain mash they endup³ becoming white-meat filet units with no discernible flavor (marine or otherwise) of their own? Thus they beocome whatever coating you apply to them. They’re the most postmodern creatiures on earth. . . metaphores for characters on Melrose Place. . . or for coders with NO LIFE” (p. 128).

The way the characters compose their email often helps them gauge the emotional or psychological state of the sender, or at least notice the change in the former. Thus, on the eve of a critical, perhaps, page-turning date of his 25th birthday Michael responded to a simple question of what present he would like with an unusually long for him (three lines!) message: “>Birthday: I want one of those keys you win in video games, that allows you to blast through walls and reach the next level – to get to *the other side*.” Daniel did not fail to notice it: “This is a particularly long message for Michael whose e-mail tends to be about three words long, normally. [Here] A carriage return, punctuation marks and everything!” (p. 149).

The influence of virtual communication on the characters’ mentality is manifested by electronic discourse spilling over into other formats of the characters’ writing and self-expression (Averianova, 2009). For Daniel’s mother, who became paralyzed after a stroke and had to use a computer to communicate, shorthand writing, or texting, was the most “natural” way to minimize her writing effort (e.g., “I lk my bdy”, “dan ct ur hair”, “gr8ly tired”). For Daniel, however, practicing compressing of the normal text into texting in his diary is a clear indication of such an influence. This is how both parts of the text look: “It wuz good 2 C hr & 4 once not hav hr yellng @ me 2 stop B-ng a noosanss. We’v wrkd mayB 10 officz apart 4 half a yEr, + we’v nevr once rEly talkd 2 Ech uthr . . . It was good to see her and for once to not have her yelling at me to stop being a nuisance. We’ve worked maybe ten offices apart for half a year, and we’ve never once really talked to each other” (pp. 16–17).

Today, nobody familiar with SMS messaging and conventions of texting would be surprised to see such a compressed text, but it should be noted here that the book was written only three years after the first experimental text message was send via the mobile phone. At that time the popularity of SMS communication and subsequently texting was merely at its onset, which puts Microserfs at the foreground not only of innovative technologies, but also of the new discursive trend. It also testifies to the limited, restricted range of their intellectual interests which are focused mostly on coding and compressing information. Susan, for instance, is “a real coding machine” (p. 9), while Michael is “testing the legibility of the text in the absence

3 Non-normative writing here and elsewhere is quoted after the original.

of information” (p. 109) by inking out all of the vowels on the restaurant menu. If we add here Daniel’s lists of random words that just “pop” into his head, which he calls his “subconscious files” or two-page texts of one word (*machine* and *money*) rewritten 592 times, we can easily get Coupland’s message: the life of his characters is incredibly messed up, with coding and programming being the main, if not the only, axis of it. Their machines, computers, comprise such an important part of their world that they tend to endow them with human properties, such as sub consciousness or emotions (e.g., for them, computer crashing is like screaming for human babies). These young people are so absorbed by the world of technology that even personal diaries and restaurant menus become an object of yet another programming experiment. This conclusion may be supported by what Coupland himself said about the atmosphere in Microsoft: “These people are so locked into their world, by default some sort of transcendence is located elsewhere, and obviously machines become the totem they imbue with sacred properties, wishes, hopes, goals, desires, dreams. That sounds like 1940s SF, but it’s become the world” (McClellan, 1995). The protagonist Daniel calls it over-focusing and narrow-focusing and believes it to be the major problem of high-level IT employees, or nerds, but, at the same time, “it’s precisely this ability to narrow-focus that makes them so good at code writing: one line at a time, one line in a strand of millions” (p. 2).

In Search for Identity

Disappearing time, disappearing identity, lack of life and futile attempts at its imitation are the main characteristics of the garrison life of *Microserfs*, whether on the Microsoft Campus, in Washington, or down south, in Silicone Valley. Escaping to California from the merciless slavery of Bill is undertaken by the protagonists mostly in hope to find an identity, to have a life.

In his novel *Microserfs*, Coupland articulates his theory about identity status in the epoch of global computer technologies, in other words, amidst the virtual mediascape. This environment is not conducive to identity development as it lacks “the traditional identity-donating structures like other places in the world have: religion, politics, cohesive family structure, roots, a sense of history or other prescribed belief systems that take the onus off individuals having to figure out who they are” (p. 236). People are on their own in this sterile milieu, and each of them is looking for a way to get an identity. Daniel, for instance, decides to go by Tootsie theory: “If you concoct a convincing on-line meta-personality on the Net, then that personality really IS you. With so few things around nowadays to loan a person identity, the palette of identities you create for yourself in the vacuum of the Net – your menu of alternative “you’s” - actually IS you. Or an isotope of you. Or a photocopy of you” (p. 327).

It is evident, that all these multiple identities surfing the virtual reality of the Net are, in fact, the manifestation of the utmost void of any identity per se. In this respect, the virtual world is very similar to the real one, but here it is not the vacuum but conformity that works as a powerful annihilator of identity. In the real world, according to one of the characters, Bug, people try not to be different, have to be just like everyone else in order to survive. And then, “anonymity becomes reflexive – and then one day you wake up and you’ve *become* all those other people – the *others* – the something you aren’t. And you wonder if you can ever be what it is you really *are*. Or you wonder if it’s too late to find out” (p. 291). To certain extent, this perception of one’s identity as composed of multiple representations appeals to that aspect of the Canadian national identity that is characterized as “double vision”, a double image of reality and oneself in it.

In his novel *Microserfs*, Douglas Coupland managed to reflect an important cultural transformation typical of postmodern reality. According to S. Kollin (2007), social reconstruction and spiritual rebirth in the global net of urban structures starts with shedding one’s individual consciousness and immediate establishing a professional connection with the “electronic frontier” (p. 27). Coupland also shows that personal

identity is going through a severe crisis in the epoch of technologic revolution, when IT corporations invade personal space and encroach on the personal lives of their employees. But unlike Kollin, he is not totally pessimistic about this process. In his book, spiritual rebirth is possible in actual reality as soon as people realize they have become victims imprisoned in their “garrisons.” Having escaped Bill’s garrison they start a new life and gradually reconstruct or recover their true identity. They fall in love, start developing meaningful relationships, restore their connection with parents, even “come out” like it happened with Bug who finally dares to be different and acknowledges being gay.

In the climax of the novel, all that is dear to protagonists comes together in a perfect complete harmony: everybody gathers around Dan’s paralyzed mother, whom Michael teaches to “speak” with the help of a computer. And as all of them point their lasers and flashlights into a foggy January night, “cutting the weather, extending ourselves into the sky, into the end of the universe with precision technology,” Dan suddenly realizes that “what’s been missing for so long isn’t missing anymore”:

And then I thought about us . . . these children, who fell down life’s cartoon holes . . . dreamless children, alive but not living – we emerged on the other side of the cartoon holes fully awake and discovered we were whole. (p.371)

Conclusion

The novel by Douglas Coupland *Microserfs* has proved once again that its author has righteously earned his reputation of a zeitgeist, being keenly aware of socio-cultural transformations in post-modern society and their effect on younger generations. It reflected a miserable serfdom of young employees of computer corporations who are deprived of free time, hobbies, interests, and any other manifestations of normal human personal life. Ultimately, they realize not only their deficiency in life matters but also a gradual destruction of their identity. It is only the escape from the ultimate control of their enslaver that allows protagonists to become whole again and regain their life.

Looking through the lenses of “garrison mentality” found to be historically and culturally instrumental for the Canadian national identity, Coupland’s novel is a manifestation of the author’s belonging to the mainstream of the Canadian literary tradition. To a certain extent, *Microserfs*’ search for their individuality and freedom can be associated with the national quest for identity and a striving to become liberated from any incursion of the powerful colonizer across the border. Living in “the edge city” of the spatially and socially isolated corrals of corporate settlements is, as is shown by Coupland, conducive to the development of garrison mentality, which is as detrimental to a personal identity, as it is to a national one. It is still to be seen, in spite of Coupland’s optimistic finale, if precision technology will be the way to spiritual rebirth and social reconstruction or if “electronic frontier” will be just a globally extended variant of a garrison borderline.

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