



Plaisir and *jouissance*: The case of potential and textual reading of Barthes' theory

Elżbieta KOŁDRZAK*

ABSTRACT

The article is an attempt of the analysis and the interpretation of the categories 'pleasure' (Fr. *plaisir*) and 'delight' (Fr. *jouissance*), in the context of philosophically oriented theoretical-literary considerations of Roland Barthes, sacrificed to the mystery of experiencing of the love. The part first, referring mainly to Barthes' works, recognises the range of the semantic field *plaisir* and *jouissance*, as categories basic for the textual language of the outstanding theoretician. The second part introduces three examples of western cultural practices which illustrate the manner of use *plaisir* and *jouissance* as the factors of textual structures.

KEYWORDS

Roland Barthes; interpretation; theory of text; logo-technique; thinking with body; theory of cultural practices

* Assistant Professor at Department of Drama and Theatre, Institute of Modern Culture, University of Lodz, Poland. E-mail: elakol@uni.lodz.pl.

PART I

Roland Barthes (1915–1980) in his philosophically-orientated theoretical-literary analyses uses two basic cognitive categories: ‘pleasure’/*plaisir* and ‘delight’/*jouissance*. Those categories, initially serving the procedure of introducing the concept of the author’s statement (*écriture*), as well as the manner of deciphering it themselves, form a significant interpretative issue, as firstly, they send back to the Roman hedonistic message (Horace, Epictetus), secondly, they exemplify Barthes’ thesis that to express one’s thoughts, one needs to create their own language. The *plaisir* and *jouissance* categories should therefore be regarded as determinants of Barthes’ individual language, equipped with a specific semantic field which should not only be researched, but also perceived mentally and experienced as a form of seduction:

Needles to say, this is not about establishing language in a linguistic sense, a language to communicate. This is about a new language in some way related to a natural language but subject only to a semiological definition of the Text (Barthes, 1996: 5–6).

According to Barthes, creating a ‘new language’ should happen in accordance with the order of four types of technique: separating (language is supposed to emerge from a material vacuum so as to avoid the sign’s interference), articulation (it is supposed to express the unspeakable contents), ordering (it is supposed to be planned under the ritual order and untamed economy that assumes unavoidable loss) and staging (it is supposed to be liberated from the role of decorating that what is presented). ‘language [...] is the result of certain effort and not only in the field of articulated language but also the language of images’ (Barthes, 1996: 31, footnote 12). The categories of ‘pleasure’ and ‘delight’ as characterized positively and referring to the experience: ‘the emotion of being pleased’, ‘take pleasure in something’, ‘that which entices one sensually’ is gradable (‘delight’ — ‘the highest degree of experiencing pleasure’), maintain the articulated contents in Barthes’ language in the state of ‘graspability’, between fulfillment and waiting, figuration and awakening, they are the constructive element of the metonymic world order which they narrate. The context of Sigmund Freud’s theory of *libido* (Freud, 1999), excluding the cultural and social contents from the sphere of experiencing pleasure and delight, at the same time reducing the field of experiencing pleasure and delight to displays of erotic drive’s energy, could point to the relation between Barthes’ categories with the exploration of the unconscious, which content is brought out by pleasure, and also delight. The sphere of the unconscious is activated by the process of articulating pleasure and delight, sensations that play the role of the basic mechanism of inducing images, mainly erotic ones. In his work, *Sade*, *Fourier*, *Loyola* (first ed. in 1971), Barthes builds semantic field of ‘pleasure’

and 'delight' categories, explaining their meaning through examples illustrating the either erotic or utopian code, matching languages established by Sade and Fourier. Images felt as a pleasure and delight, he names as a phantasmagorical order, in which it is possible, both the existence of the author and of the reader co-existing with him, living with the author in his wonderful phantasmagory, separate from the realistic world and, in a manner of speaking, liberated from it, in the sense of being free of the repressive liberal discourse and social intervention of the text, going beyond them. Barthes, after Sade, cites the description of the technique of creating delight (inducing the phantasmagorical order) as a structure of action consisting of seven phases: asceticism (calming the trail of thoughts), preparation (receding from the world, plunging into darkness), liberation (review of the images repressed during asceticism, plunging in the phantasmagoria), rough copy (elicitation of a sense through lighting a candle / light, copying scenes from the images), proof-reading (falling asleep in order to temporarily distance from the recording so that after waking it would be possible to verify it by the delight felt while one imagines its contents), text (forming the written body from the image obtained and expanded in this manner) (Barthes, 1996: 174; Sade, 1991: 121–131; Sade, 1969). The technique of inducing or creating delight, based on Freud's theory (Freud, 1999), relates to the process of reaching the unconscious or repressed content as a result of external causations. However, as Barthes' analysis of St. Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual exercises* (Loyola, 2012), the technique of inducing phantasmagoria, matching the technique of meditation (confinement, images, repetition), should be understood wider as a will of reaching the image of what is not expressible through the process of elimination of mind's content, and disciplining it by selected figurative contents. Meanings erotically characterised are therefore just invariants of inexpressible contents that are experienced through pleasure and delight in the process of inducing phantasmagorias.

Phantasmagorias' contents, the images of utopias and mystic, along with the experiences of delight and pleasure that verify their sense, are in Barthes' language the manner of articulation of the being's individuality, and the consciousness of the mystery of ecstasy, hidden by the coded reality.

If we could only see unexpectedly this complicated harmony, this creation of God the way it's meant to be, fully developed [...] it goes without saying that many of the Civilized ones would die suddenly under pressure of ecstasy (Fourier, 1967: I. 65).

Being convinced that 'culture of civilisation, the mass culture [...] is not able to produce any meaning, any delight' (Barthes, 1975: 38), Barthes focuses his attention on the meanings produced by the 'body's thoughts' that continue the experience of individuality. Subjectivity, however — understood as an identity, seen in the category of fiction, as conditioned with meanings produced by

the culture of civilisation, regarding delight as an antisocial element. Barthes' manner of understanding categories of 'pleasure' and 'delight' also therefore consists of the idea of liberating an individual from the 'bourgeois system of neurotic politicisation and its oppressive truths of civilisation'.

In Barthes' writings one can find many references to the eastern religious-philosophical traditions (Buddhism, Zen, Taoism). They are introduced in the form of a short commentary that accompanies the discussion of the techniques of inducing phantasmagorias / meditation, from the point of view of the figuration, that is, the method of controlling the mind through *e.g.* repetition, divination, topic. Barthes points here to crucial differences between the figuration's methods, especially between the Ignatian method of dialogue and conversation, and the Buddhist method of internal Theophany which he explains through the difference of logo-technique, based on which the languages articulations of inexpressible contents are constructed. The text of *Spiritual exercises* Barthes describes as dramatic, which could be deciphered as a form of suggestion of the potential distinguishability of the methods of figuration in the view of logos: dramatics, lirycness and epicness. This suggestion is confirmed by the complex logo-technique of the language used by Barthes in *A lover's discourse: Fragments* (Barthes, 1977), consisting of four equal languages (scientific discourse, commentary, journal and a conversation) which Barthes uses as methods of figuration of the meditation upon the unimagability of experiencing love.

PART II

The theory of Text (Barthes, 1981), articulated in language that is peculiarly hermetic, metonymic towards described contents (as if similarly to biblical language), just as written into the Text the concept of communication consistent with the categories of *plaisir* and *jouissance*, subjected to formalization along with the conventions of eroticism, make Barthes an important, but also demanding, element of the contemporary cultural discourse. Some paradoxicality of cultural space, in which Barthes' point is based, stemming from the intention of discourse on the plane of meanings, not referring to the real world but just the individual experiences of the author and the reader, their hermetic and individual co-existence in the relation of erotic desire, serves as a natural border between the potential and textual (intellectual) reading of it. Barthes himself was conscious of two possible manners of conversing with his Texts: intellectual and corporal.

In the intellectual reading, the theory of text is a model example of post-modern depiction of culture's content. Typically regarded as its determinant is the common understanding of the statement referring to 'death of the author',

authorising the making of any operations, manipulations and procedures in the limits of author's discourse. With this sort of reading comes a devaluation of the sense of 'pleasure' and 'delight' categories. With the popular culture in the background, in which the themes 'desire', 'pleasure', 'delight', 'erotica', 'corporality' function as synonyms of a commodity, a semantic discipline of Barthes' categories is subjected to immediate functionalization. As John Fiske aptly remarks, 'These popular forces transform the cultural commodity into a cultural resource, pluralize the meanings and pleasures it offers, evade or resist its disciplinary efforts, fracture its homogeneity and coherence, raid or poach upon its terrain' (Fiske, 1989: 28). Interestingly, Fiske offers one of the popular propositions of interpreting the *plaisir* and *jouissance* categories in the context of popular culture:

Plaisir is more of an everyday pleasure, *jouissance* that of special, carnivalesque moments. *Plaisir* involves the recognition, confirmation, and negotiation of social identity, reactionary pleasure (though it may be). These are pleasures in confirming to the dominant ideology, and the subjectivity it proposes when it is in our interest to do so; equally there are pleasures of opposing or modifying that ideology and its subjectivities when they fail to meet our interests (Fiske, 1989: 54).

Fiske illustrates his analysis with an example displaying the emotionally-psychological dynamics of the social and familial relations of a housewife, who functioning in a patriarchal society, regularly buys pleasure of 'escaping the [patriarchal] forces, who want to tame her [the housewife] and who "loses herself in reading"', whereas *plaisir* represents creating antithetic meanings of womanhood and the relations between the two genders' (Fiske, 1989: 55). Transposition of Barthes' categories' meanings, in their source belonging to high culture, into the plane of popular culture that activates programmatically psychologically-socially-political contents omitted by Barthes, is an attempt of using the theory of Text to describe the cultural mechanisms and an attempt of using the figuration's concept to analyse the relations between an individual and the culture in which it functions. It seems that the effect of this procedure is making Barthes' theory quite mechanically alike to Eric Fromm's neo-psychoanalysis (Fromm, 1997).

The cultural phenomenon associated to popular culture, at the same time subjugated to language's discipline, after the theory of Text, is analysed both by Fiske and by Barthes, is wrestling. Talking about this cultural spectacle, Fiske (basing it on Barthes' speeches) points to those of its distinguishing marks: the central position of corporeality, pageantry, the position on the verge of art and life, excessiveness, exaggeration, carnivalisation, ritualisation, exposing corporal experiences, isolation from reality, no subjectivity, over-materialism, the use of slander and curses, the speech of corporeality, gestures

and posture, no rules of fair-play (Fiske, 1989: 87–89; Barthes, 1973). In spite of that, wrestling almost fully enters into the assumptions of theory of Text, in this form of a spectacle the sphere of individuality linking the viewer with the author, which is significant from the point of view of Barthes' deliberations, is not readily visible. Both, the authors (the spectacle's actors) and the readers (the audience), even though they communicate through articulating and experiencing *jouissance*, function in a world 'through the looking glass', where the *plaisir* category is as if suspended. That is why also the individuality becomes suspended, for the of community. The example of wrestling shows that Barthes' categories *plaisir* and *jouissance* exist simultaneously, interchangeably, and as such, they create the necessary element of Text's language.

The cultural phenomenon in which all of the Text's theory aspects came to the surface was the *Paradise Now* spectacle, staged by *The Living Theatre* established by Judith Malina and Julian Beck in the beginning of 1950s. The performance that premiered in 1968 during a theatrical festival in Avignon, was staged accordingly with the four techniques of creating a 'new language' and to the figuration's methods, using, in this example, models of gradability, ritual and vision, as well as, the logos of dramatics, lyricism and epicness. Body was chosen as the means of expression. According to Marie-Claire Pasquier:

Tout le discours déployé — par les créateurs eux-mêmes — autor de *Paradise Now* fait un peu oublier qu'il s'agissait de communiquer *pratiquement sans texte*, à part quelques slogans, quelques questions clés, toute une vision du monde et toute une pratique découlant de cette vision. Belle ambition que de faire porter des sens si multiples, si chargés de références, à une trentaine de corps (presque) nus. Ce qui reste dans les mémoires, c'est moins un message verbal, ou verbalisable, qu'une stylistique, un vocabulaire des gestes et des corps, une réutilisation des sons et des mouvements, une pratique, justement, pour indiquer l'accord et la discorde, la communion et la dissension, la violence et la douceur, l'affrontement et la fusion, toutes les figures que peuvent composer les éléments humains à l'intérieur des groupes qu'ils forment: figures abstraites, désincarnées, dans leur nudité primordiale, dépouillées de tous les oripeaux du psychologique et du sociologique pour donner chair (Pasquier, 1978: 112–113).¹

In *Paradise Now*, the discipline of the language of articulation was subjected to, like in Fourier's text, expressing the utopian content, so the ones which

¹ '[...] it was about communicating — virtually, with no text (verbal), taking out some catchphrases, a few key issues — the entire vision of the world and manner of conduct resulting from that vision. It is quite an ambitious design to express so differentiated, so rich in traditions ideas with the use of about thirty (almost) naked bodies. In my memory remains not only the verbal message but also a certain design, language of gestures and bodies, repeated use of sounds and motions, actions aiming at showing harmony and discord, unity and division, violence and mildness, clashes and unions of all characters that may be manifested by human elements inside groups created by themselves; abstractive characters, dematerialized in their original nudity, stripped from any psychological or sociological coat' (translated into English by E.K.).

as the actors' phantasmagorias are experiences by them through pleasure and delight, momentarily even transforming into ecstasy. Thanks to that, the spectacle as a Text was based on the individuality, which as a corporeal fulfilment, became the object of the individual viewer's desire, 'Le but est d'honorer le corps, l'acte sexuel est vu comme une expérimentation de l'être, le rite comme un dépassement du sentiment de possession' (Jacquot, 1970: 255).²

Dans *Paradise Now*, il faut rappeler qu'une atmosphère de religiosité baignait la pièce, qu'il s'agissait de 'sanctifier la vie quotidienne', et qu'il faut replacer cette copulation universelle dans la recherche d'une transcendance (Pasquier, 1978: 112).³

At the same time, similarly to Sade's texts, the spectacle 'articulated antisocial contents, demonstrating the nudeness was thought-through and realised as a conscious overstepping of the commonly accepted norm and ethical and moral examples of the given society' (Braun, 1984: 233). The event, on all planes of its structure, was therefore happening accordingly with the described by Barthes semantics of *plaisir* and *jouissance* categories.

Based on 'thinking with one's body' textual, but also cultural, discourse proposed by Roland Barthes could serve to destroy or re-new the quality of culture. As the author illustrates through the analyses he performs, the tool described as Text is not only universal, in the sense of effectiveness of the description of various acts of working, but also disciplining, in the sense of language's rigours through which it expresses itself. As the semantic fields of *plaisir* and *jouissance* categories show, the corporeal experience alone, if it cannot be articulated in the created with that intent language, do not belong to the domain of Text.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barthes, R. (1973). *Mythologies*. London: Paladin.
- Barthes, R. (1975). *The pleasure of the text*. (R. Miller, Trans.). New York: Hill and Wang.
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Barthes, R. (1981). Theory of the Text (R. J. C. Young, Transl.). In: R. J. C. Young (Ed.). *Untying the text: A post-structuralism reader* (pp. 31–47). London–Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Barthes, R. (1996). *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*. (R. Lis, Trans.). Warszawa: Wydawnictwo KR (1st ed. in French: Paris: Éditions du Seuil).
- Braun, K. (1984). *Nadmiar teatru*. Warszawa: Czytelnik.
- Fiske, J. (1989). *Understanding popular culture*. London: Routledge.

² 'The purpose is to glorify the body, a sexual act has been shown as feeling the human being, a ritual as going beyond a sense of estate'.

³ '*Paradise Now* has been bathed in religious atmosphere, it was about glorifying everyday life and this popular copulation should be ranked among seeking transcendence'.

- Fourier, Ch. (1967). *Oeuvres complètes*. Paris: Édition Anthropos.
- Freud, S. (1975). *Three essays on the theory of sexuality* (J. Strachey, Transl. & Ed.). New York: Basic Books.
- Freud, S. (1999). *The interpretation of dreams* (J. Strachey, Transl. & Ed). Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fromm, E. (1997). *Love, sexuality, and matriarchy: About gender*. New York: Fromm International Publication.
- Jacquot, J. (1970). *Le Living Theatre* (= *Les voies de la création théâtrale, 1*). Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique.
- Loyola, St. Ignatius of (2012). *Spiritual exercises*. (E. Mullen, Trans.). Altenmünster: Jazybee Verlag (1st ed. in English: 1847. Ch. Seager, Trans. London: Charles Dolman).
- Pasquier, M.-C. (1978). *Le théâtre américain d'aujourd'hui*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Sade, Marquis de (1969). *Justine ou les Malheurs de la vertu*. Paris: Union générale d'éditions.
- Sade, Donatien de (1991). *Justyna albo niedole cnoty* (M. Bratuń, Trans.). Łódź: Wydawnictwo Łódzkie.