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A Postmodern Rendering of Society and Everyday Life in Renata Adler's *Speedboat*

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Introduction

Renata Adler's *Speedboat* (1976) is, as described by many critics, an episodic novel with a plot that is neither clear nor sequential. Written in a time described by Guy Trebay as the "hangover" of its preceding years (174), it recounts the experiences of the observant Jen Fain in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, as well as the development and launch of the first mobile phone. The novel is composed of minor glimpses into the lives of various characters whose stories at first glance do not appear conspicuously coherent. What holds them together is that these stories are all observed and told by Jen: a New York-based journalist with a world-view which is alternatively sarcastic and dejected. Though lacking a structured plot, the novel deals with a variety of things including relationships, school, strange pets and professors, a prowler, journalistic coverage, war, necrophilia and how annoying it is to hear people chew, to mention a few topics.

Adler's portrayal of the many absurd everyday life situations experienced and told by Jen Fain turns what happens during an ordinary day into something extraordinary by focusing on the odd snippets that may otherwise go unnoticed. The novel can be seen as a critical representation of the contemporary American society of the mid-seventies where people to a large extent are portrayed, or perhaps interpreted by the reader, as negligent and self-absorbed, presumably as a result of the estrangement from the self brought about by capitalism and consumerism. As Trebay puts it, the novel is concerned with "morality [being] subject to constant revision," (175) which is shown through an overlaying sense of purposelessness and humorous absurdism.

The narration in postmodern fiction can be highly subjective because people are "alienated" from being a part of a "postindustrial, information-driven [and] media/culture-saturated world" (Nicol, *The Cambridge* 4). French philosopher and everyday life theorist Henri Lefebvre bases his *Critique of Everyday Life* on the concept of alienation (3). He describes a society that has been taken over by technology, which has led to a "degradation" of everyday life for people who have not had the ability to adapt to the changes (*Critique* 8-10). Lefebvre's theory coincides with Alvin Toffler's idea about a "throw-away society" where people are less appreciative of their material belongings as well as their relationships because mass-production makes everything replaceable and thus less valuable (47-49). On the notion of how everyday life is

portrayed in fiction, Wolfgang Iser paraphrases Sartre: “‘images cannot be synthesized into a sequence, but one must continually abandon an image the moment one is forced by circumstances to produce a new one’” (qtd. in Hoffmann 119). What is stated above can be seen as an indication as to why postmodern fiction is frequently fragmentary. The world is never constant and standing still but perpetually in motion. Thus, everything from an abstract memory to a concrete thing will always be replaced. This is ultimately one of the key themes of *Speedboat*: a society in incessant change.

This essay will argue that Renata Adler creates a postmodern consciousness of everyday life in the American society of the mid-seventies. Adler does this by letting Jen Fain talk about seemingly trivial things in life in a fragmentary and subjective way. It will focus on the effects that living in a consumer and mass-production society has had on people, as well as the subsequent alienation that supposedly pervaded the time of the publication of *Speedboat*. The essay will begin with a brief exposition of postmodernism and a short summary of the historical context of its origin. It will then explain the theory of everyday life and how it is formally constructed in the novel. Lastly, there will be an analysis of how consumer culture and people’s alienation from the self and society are portrayed in the novel, followed by a conclusion.

An Overview of Postmodernism

As mentioned in the introduction, *Speedboat* is a highly fragmented novel that never discusses any matter in depth. This largely leaves it up to the reader to make sense of its topics, be it criticism of the government or dissatisfaction with everyday life. In *Everyday Life and the Modern World*, Henri Lefebvre explains the importance of context when trying to grasp the concept of everyday life:

If we wish to define everyday life we must first define the society where it is lived, where the quotidian and modernity take root; we must define its changes and perspectives, distinguishing from an assortment of apparently insignificant phenomena those that are essential and co-ordinating them. The quotidian is not only a concept but one that may be used as a guide-line for an understanding of ‘society.’ (28)

To better understand *Speedboat*, in agreement with Lefebvre, it can be of great use for the reader to have a basic understanding of the contemporary society at the time of the novel's publication, and a brief historical context overview is therefore necessary. Furthermore, knowledge about certain literary stylistic traits will facilitate the reading of the novel. Considering the fact that Renata Adler is a postmodern novelist (Hoffmann 548), a good starting point is to discern some ways of writing that are usually associated with postmodernism. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, Bran Nicol points out that "postmodern fiction is far too diverse in style to be a genre." Instead he continues by calling the type of fiction, as a whole, an "aesthetic" which is comprised of "a set of principles, or a value-system" (xvi). According to Nicol, it is not easy to simply make a list of stylistics constituting postmodernism. Rather, it is a concept that needs to be referenced to its historical origin in order to distinguish what value-system it contains.

As stated above, it is the sum of the whole, the "set of principles," that ultimately makes a text what it is and thus a modernist writer can easily be interpreted as a postmodernist writer, and vice versa (Nicol, *The Cambridge* 18). When it comes to interpreting language, Nicol further points out that there are slight differences between the meanings of the cognate words postmodern, postmodernity and postmodernism: postmodern constitutes a period in time as well as the "set of aesthetics" that were characteristic of this time, postmodernity is concerned with the effects that "developments in the political, social, economic, and media spheres" had on society in the same period, and postmodernism is the collective idea distinguished from "philosophy and theory" (*The Cambridge* 1-2). To avoid confusion this essay will not distinguish between the three derivatives but will refer to postmodern fiction as a whole and the way it has been represented and explained in the following paragraphs.

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when postmodernism came about, but there seems to be a consensus amongst theorists and scholars that it emerged sometime after the Second World War, and was more or less established as an accepted term from the fifties and sixties onwards (Hoffmann 33-35). The aesthetic was affected and shaped by the lamentable death of John F. Kennedy, the discontent with the war in Vietnam, the crisis in Cuba almost leading to a nuclear war, the civil rights movement and black power arising, and later the Watergate Scandal in the seventies. This brought about a

“commitment to exposing the fact that everyday American reality was manufactured ... by the authorities” (Nicol *The Cambridge* 18, 39, 72), or the “[f]aceless masters,” as Fredric Jameson calls them (27).

Since the beginning of postmodernism there has been a debate regarding whether or not it is a successor of modernism or just a continuation of it. The core ideologies of modernism and postmodernism respectively have their variations, but an assumption can be made that the latter contains some aspects of the former just as it has been developed from it. Therefore, some information about modernism is also included here. Nicol writes that modernism, and its modern society, has been related to what it was that became “mechanized, urban, and bureaucratic” as a result of industrialization. Postmodernism has in turn been associated with “late capitalism” and “consumerism,” as well as “the dominance of the virtual and the digital” (*The Cambridge* 2). The postmodernists began mixing styles and genres as well as “low’ with high culture,” and were more “playful and ironic” in comparison to the modernists who preferred structure and “originality” (*The Cambridge* 2). In addition, modernist concepts like “defamiliarization, consciousness [and] fragmentation” were adopted and amplified by the postmodernists (Matz 132), and Adler uses them throughout *Speedboat*.

In 1967, John Barth published his essay “The Literature of Replenishment” which sparked the development of what would later be called postmodernism. Barth claimed that during their heyday, the modernists had used up all innovation there was to find concerning literature and writing, thus exhausting the genre. As a result, postmodernism was indeed a replenishment; Jesse Matz states that it brought life back to what the modernists lost sense of when the world went “cold with technology, rationality [and] materialism” (128). The “exhaustion” in literature was a consequence of writers producing texts without meaning only for the sake of producing, which ultimately left them without innovation to create something new: “[e]verything had already been done” (Matz 127,129). Paradoxically, the postmodernists replenished by “try[ing] something new,” which they did by making fun of themselves through parody, as well as by questioning the representation of reality in fiction (Matz 130-131). Though somewhat diverse in style preferences, what both movements shared was the urge to break free from and question the realists from the preceding century (Nicol, *The Cambridge* 18). They did this by presenting the ordinariness of everyday life in fiction.

Realism, Nicol explains, was based on the idea that literature could create a fictional world that was a direct duplicate of the real world. The modernists thought that the realists failed in representing “subjectivity” and believed that the inner thoughts of people and *how* we perceive the world, in contrast to how we *think* we experience it, should be a primary focus when writing fiction. Taking it one step further, the postmodernists could not accept that it was possible to “transcribe” reality at all, and instead, they believed that fiction had to do with “creating” reality (*The Cambridge* 18, 23, 25). Additionally, something worth mentioning is the fact that the reader’s engagement plays a role when reading fiction. Postmodern theorists agree that because language is indeed subjective it is *given* meaning by the reader (Paul 128). In other words, fiction can never represent reality because as soon as it is written down it is created and thus not real. In addition, a text will have different meanings to different readers. Therefore, for a text to be interpreted roughly the same way by many readers, it can be beneficial for them to have the same understanding of both the history and the theory concerning a text.

In short, postmodernism is a highly paradoxical aesthetic within literature that can still be seen to be ongoing. It favors stylistic approaches like fragmentation, parody and irony, and gets inspiration from other genres and texts. Defamiliarization is used to make the ordinary seem unfamiliar, and thus put focus on something that has been overlooked (Norris). Authority is frequently scrutinized in postmodern texts. In addition, postmodernism can be seen as a strong reaction to the consumerism that followed the industrialization and advances in mass-media and mass-production. It is also concerned with the individual’s estrangement from the self and the world as a consequence of living in a mass-produced society. The above stated literary techniques and ideas are adopted by Adler as means to represent the everyday life of the contemporary American society of the seventies.

Creating Society and Everyday Life in *Speedboat*

Everyday life might sound self-explanatory but there is more to the concept than is suggested in the name. Henri Lefebvre describes the everyday as “the insignificant and the banal” and “repetition[s] in daily life,” and he furthermore suggests that it was because of “literature” that people began to think about everyday life at all, thanks to

James Joyce (*Toward* 78-79). Focus is put on the mundane in the everyday life described by Lefebvre. He emphasizes that “the quotidian is ... what is taken for granted” (*Everyday* 24) and that when portraying everyday life “the trivial becomes extraordinary, and the habitual become mythical” (*Critique* 14). Moreover, the everyday is pervaded by “contradictions: illusions and truth, power and helplessness,” including how something in a person’s life can go from under control to uncontrollable (*Critique* 21). These summaries give some insight into what constitutes everyday life according to Lefebvre, but as mentioned previously in this essay he also emphasizes that “analysis of everyday life involves, in retrospect, a particular view of history and the historicity of everyday life can only be compiled by exposing its emergence in the past” (*Everyday* 37-38). He stresses that it is important to have some historical knowledge about the ways of society at a certain time to make it possible to understand the behavior of the contemporary people. Something that is essential to this essay is to explain the impact that the growing consumer culture had on the late half of twentieth century America.

In the mid-twentieth century, everyday life in postmodern fiction was to a seemingly large extent anchored in the late capitalist and consumer society. Liesl Olson summarizes the thoughts of Henri Lefebvre about “the conditions of everyday life [being] driven largely by a capitalist culture in which actions have become mechanical, alienating, and soul-destroying” (12). Lefebvre argues that there is a “sense of unrest that pervades everyday life,” especially in “literature” (*Everyday* 80). The “unrest” is rooted in “the urge to satisfy all desires with material objects,” and as a result of this “people [become] estranged from themselves and from each other under the conditions of capitalist production” (Olson 13,14). This capitalist culture is also a part of what Irving Howe calls “mass society,” which he defines in agreement with Lefebvre:

[It is] a relatively comfortable, half-welfare and half-garrison society in which the population grows passive, indifferent, and atomized; ... in which coherent publics based on definite interests and opinions gradually fall apart; and in which man becomes a consumer, himself mass-produced like the products, diversions, and values that he absorbs. (148)

At the same time as postmodernism was growing, people in society were becoming increasingly apathetic and indifferent as a consequence of mass-production. Commodities and services became fleeting and less tangible. Banking became electronic, which devalued money and made it easier to spend, and in combination with faster production rates the urge to buy new things grew bigger and a spiral of buying and disposing began. David Harvey discusses that all of this resulted in a conceivable “[s]peed-up” in society where everything was becoming more fast paced and fragmentary due to the “disposability” of things and “values” (40-42). This is what Alvin Toffler calls a “throw-away society” (49), in which “man’s relationships with *things* are increasingly temporary,” and everything, from people to material objects, becomes replaceable (47). Interestingly enough, everyday life in *Speedboat* stems from the societies described above.

Before the main analysis, it is relevant to pay some attention to the more practical ways that Adler creates everyday life in the novel, because the meaning of a text does not only lie in the mere content of it, but also in the literary techniques behind it. Patricia Waugh suggests “that it is impossible to describe an objective world because the observer always changes the observed” (240). Further emphasizing subjectivity, Waugh discusses literary techniques that are used to remind the reader that what is read is fiction, and not a depiction of reality. The reminder is usually achieved by letting the narrator be “over-obtrusive [and] visibly inventing,” the text being deprived of its continuity, and the “dehumanization of character,” to name a few (241). Adler uses all of these techniques in her novel. Jen Fain frequently interjects her own narration with subjective views and statements, which in turn interrupts the continuity of the novel. She concisely recounts what she observes and thinks, and as a result, the characters that the reader is presented to are conceivably dehumanized.

In *Speedboat*, characters are dehumanized most concretely, and visibly, in the way that they are rarely given names and are instead talked about in substantival and adjectival manners: the father, the girl, the queen, the tycoon, the prowler, the English teacher, etc. Some characters are given names, suggesting that they are somehow more important than others, but more frequently Adler uses pronouns to bring her narrative forward. From a practical perspective, using pronouns can avoid confusion between the multiple personalities portrayed in the novel. It can also be seen to formalistically create

and emphasize the distance between protagonist Jen Fain and the people she observes, which incorporates Lefebvre's idea of alienation. The frequent use of pronouns additionally allows for shorter, more concise sentences that speed up the narrative:

I have a job, of course. I have had several jobs. I've had our paper's gossip column since last month. It is egalitarian. I look for people who are quite obscure, and report who is breaking up with whom and where they go and what they wear. The person who invented this new form for us is on antidepressants now. He lives in Illinois. (54)

Adler often finishes her sentences quite abruptly, which reduces the possibility to develop, or to go deeper, into a character or situation. She creates a notion of a fleeting moment and a narrative that is speeded up, just like Harvey and Toffler argue that the contemporary society is speeded up and temporary. Olson describes a way of representing the ordinary in fiction as follows: "the ordinary can be a mode of organizing life and representing it; it is a *style*, best represented by the routine, and aesthetic forms such as the list, or linguistic repetition, both of which attempt to embody the ordinary," and as a result of this "[r]outine and habit, enacted by linguistic repetition, become more important than ... chronologically ordered events" (6). This embodies Adler's writing style in *Speedboat*, in which she only writes what is important and abstains from giving superfluous information. She leaves it up to Jen Fain to lead the narrative forward, which she does in no chronological order and with frequent linguistic repetition, briefly illustrated in the quotation above.

Throw-away Culture and Morality

The postmodernists thought that it was impossible to depict reality in fiction. In accordance with this thought, Adler creates a consciousness to portray the generalized thoughts of a society instead of concretely describing it in detail. Everyday life experiences are amplified in their absurdities by being foregrounded instead of overlooked. Olson explains "the ordinary" as "consist[ing] of activities and things that are most frequently characterized by our inattention to them" (6). What happens in Jen's life might not be very different from anybody else's everyday, but when easily

neglected events are noticed they do indeed become extraordinary. Observing something out of the ordinary in an otherwise one-dimensional world can create a depth that can otherwise seem to be lacking in everyday life. Already at an early point in the novel, Adler's Jen Fain is honest about not being able to appreciate the everyday:

For a while, I thought I had no real interests ... Only ambitions and ties to people, of a certain intensity. Different sorts of people. I was becoming a ward heeler of the emotional life. Now the ambitions have drifted after the interests. I have lost my sense of the whole. I wait for events to take a form. (10)

The loss of purpose that Jen feels correlates with Toffler's theory about everything, including emotions, being disposable. He argues that people "develop a throw-away mentality to match [their] throw-away products" (50). If people are unable to maintain emotions and material objects, they will have nothing left to constitute their whole. Jen seems to be waiting for someone else to show her "the whole": "You cannot be forever watching for the point, or you lose the simplest thing: being a major character in your own life ... The point has never quite been entrusted to me" (56). Jen admits that without "the point" she is no longer a major character in her own life. At the same time, she is aware that this is the case, and she is starting to embody the "mass-society" that Howe describes; she is growing passive, she has lost her "definite interests and opinions," and she is open to absorb other people's values which in the end will render her "mass-produced." In addition, time is important when discussing this quotation because life is ultimately finite. "Forever" indicates that Jen feels that people have a tendency to dwell on things. Possibly, she has noticed a common fear of getting stuck in life, which can be seen as a reason to why the people in her society have become more fleeting and unable to maintain things and relationships.

Jen recounts a story about some bombings and concludes her narration with: "I don't know what it means. I am in this brownstone" (66). She highlights the difficulty of relating to things when being in a different place than the event in question. Even though she is to a certain degree aware of what is going on around her, Jen cannot relate because she cannot see how it relates to her. As stated previously in this essay, Harvey presents an apathetic, fragmentary world created by TV and fleeting images (40-42).

This world is partly demonstrated by an increased gap between people and what they feel they have a connection with. Information that people absorb through mass-produced TV and newspapers makes people more distanced from each other when they become aware of their differences in both culture and living conditions. People are constantly reminded of what they do not know, and they are prevented from seeing “the whole” because their knowledge of the world does not stretch further than their own personal realms. Jen captures this ignorance by the confinement of the brownstone; her awareness is only a piece of a fragmentary whole, restricted within the building’s walls.

Adler further puts focus on the fact that it is difficult to determine what is important in a society that is swamped with information. She does this by pointing out difficulties in maintaining concentration and focus when there has been “in fact, so many scandals, local, personal, and national, that it [is] hard to sustain attention to any single one” (86). As Toffler claims, everything is replaceable and it is difficult to maintain an interest in anything when provided with something else almost at the same instant (47-49). The throw-away mentality he describes is in one way represented in the novel by the short duration of things. As a journalist, Jen gets information from a place called “the Center of Short-Lived Phenomena” about events that might not usually be paid attention to: “the Tanzanian Army Worm Outbreak,” “The Green Pond Fish Kill” and “The Hawaiian Monkey Seal Disappearance” (65). When she talks about these events she says that “[t]hose are accounts of things that did not last long” (65). Her statement supports the idea that the everyday is disposable because nothing in it lasts long enough to create an enduring interest, something that results in indifference.

Indifference pervades the everyday life created by Adler. Jen tries to make sense of a state of mind that is, according to her, common in the society she lives in:

It is not at all self-evident what boredom is. It implies, for example, an idea of duration. It would be crazy to say, For three seconds there, I was bored. It implies indifference but, at the same time, requires a degree of attention. One cannot properly be said to be bored by anything one has not noticed, or in a coma, or asleep. But this I know, or think I know, that idle people are often bored and bored people, unless they sleep a lot, are cruel. It is no accident that boredom and cruelty are great preoccupations in our time. (131)

Being bored is an example of how mass-production has failed in stimulating the public. People have no preferences because they have been presented with too many ideas and values, and too many replaceable commodities that are all easy to dismiss in favor of other alternatives. They have been told what to do and what to think, what is good and what is not, which in turn has rendered them unable to think for themselves. As Jen says, it is impossible to be bored by things one has not noticed, suggesting that no measures have been taken to counteract the boredom. The previous paragraph emphasizes the difficulty to create an enduring interest in something when the “something” in question never exists long enough. The same applies for the quotation above where it is suggested that nothing has been around long enough to be deemed of value to be paid attention to. The idleness that comes from not engaging with anything in particular can lead to mental passivity, and Adler subtly incorporates this by only presenting few occasions where characters have opinions at all.

Contradictory to the idleness and mental passivity described in the novel, Adler also invokes the kind of “unrest” that Lefebvre highlights. Jen ponders over what goes on in her mind: “Sometimes it seems that this may be a nervous breakdown – sleeping all day, tears, insomnia at midnight, and again at four a.m. Then it occurs to me that a lot of people have it. Or, of course, worse” (14). Insomnia is mentioned multiple times and embodies the inability to relax in an increasingly stressful society. Not only are signs of mental instability used to highlight the unrest, but physical symptoms, like the “yuppie-flu” that Harvey writes about, are also used to indicate this: “a psychological stress condition that paralyses the performance of ... people and produces long-lasting flu-like symptoms” (*Time-Space* 43). Adler draws a parallel to this when Jen is skeptical about leading a healthy life: “Situps aside, it is possible that we are really a group of invalids, hypochondriacs, and misfits. I don’t know. Even our people who stay fit with yoga seem to be, more than others, subject to the flu” (168). With mass-media, it is easier to create an ideal lifestyle because the idea can reach more people. In the case of Jen and her friends, the flu is more likely a consequence of feeling more pressure to be a perfect “self” than it is a physical disease. The unrest manifests in self-induced disease because it is easier to blame something inherently uncontrollable than admit that you cannot cope with the idealized life created by society. Also, hypochondria is in

itself an indication that the flu might not be “real,” which reinforces the possibility that it is, in this case, a state of mind rather than an actual illness. Society is indirectly governed by an authoritative collective voice who is telling people how they should live their lives, making the question of what is right or wrong increasingly dubious.

As mentioned by Guy Trebay in the afterword to *Speedboat*, Jen is constantly faced with “moral quandar[ies]” (174-175). All through the novel, Adler challenges the reader to question what is right and what is wrong by only recounting events as Jen experiences them. Jen is of course biased, but she does not have the role of a moral consciousness. She rather has that of a general one. She tells stories even if they do not make her look good, but usually there are some indications of a moral dilemma. For example, already when Jen is a young girl at a boarding school run by Communists, she is faced with the powers that the authorities have over their subjects:

We voted constantly on everything ... We were expected at every age to have an opinion on all matters, political matters in particular ... We voted to stone the girl who banged her head [against the bedpost] – not because she banged her head, but because she was so fat and furtive and whining all the time ... None of the stones hit. We were too uncoordinated and too young to throw accurately across the distance we had also, in all fairness, voted for. The space-time continuum became clear to us with that event. So, perhaps, did the quality of mercy, after all. (17-18)

Defining what morality is can certainly be difficult as it can mean different things to different people. With these lines, Adler illustrates how easy it is for authority figures to influence people who do not yet know what is considered morally acceptable or not, that is in the eyes of a specific society. The children ultimately understand that what they are doing to the girl who is deemed different might not be just. In the incident above, they learn from their actions and find balance between turning to the self and someone else when faced with a moral dilemma. Implicitly, they also start to question to what extent one should listen to others’ opinions in unfamiliar situations. When Jen is an adult, the credulity displayed in this quotation turns into skepticism toward authority and being told what to do and think, and she conveys this throughout the novel.

Jen strongly emphasizes her skepticism toward authority in a comparison with Shakespeare's Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. Jen's English teacher thinks that Shylock is "a villain ... comparable, and perhaps even related, to all the many traitors in our own time, our own country, brainwashing our boys abroad, flashing subliminal messages on television, stealthily approaching, if they did not already have, our minds" (143). Similarly to the incident with the stoning above, the English teacher stresses that the people who have power, in either politics or media etc., have gained control over the individual's interests and ability to form an opinion. Consequently, people have stopped questioning authority and become brainwashed. Television has become a trustworthy medium through which it is easy to steer the public opinion without engaging with the people. Because of this, the authority in question is spared from being vulnerable to opposition when meeting the public in real life, which is also something that is in agreement with Lefebvre who asserts that "the everyday is not only programmed, but it is entirely mediated and mass-mediated ... it is completely manipulated" (*Toward* 79).

Skepticism is mixed with cynicism in the novel, and is in part demonstrated when Jen says: "It is possible that there will be murder, in the end" (101), when talking about the secret quarreling over the newspaper engaged in by her neighbors. When people in general refuse to sing the Birthdays-song she says that "... having no respect for occasions means having no respect for the moment, after all" (108). What is more, when the Texas girl Bootsy Garn "refuse[s] to get out of the bus" to go climbing with her classmates, she does it with unyielding resolve: "I just don't see the sense of it" (24). Through concise and striking comments like these, Jen shows her loss of faith in authorities by implying that without clear guidance in life people do what they want and disregard consequences and morality. Jen also conveys loss of faith in her peers, or rather a hopelessness that pervades her attitude toward them, and there is again a disinclination to try to "see the point," of trying to understand them, or even like them.

Adler continues to question people's ability to form an opinion by letting a socialite hostess criticize the topics and manner of conversation that her guests engage in: "she thought the dinner would be wasted if the conversation did not become more general, if it was all private bon mots spliced together, or just gossip. She thought we ought to talk about America today" (49). The hostess remarks that the contemporary everyday conversations have become uninteresting, and presumably superficial. As

discussed earlier in this essay, constantly being subject to information and impressions might inhibit people from forming an opinion at all. Nevertheless, in accordance with Lefebvre, the everyday is permeated by “contradictions,” and Jen expresses her dislike for people who give the impression of having too much to say about things: “I think a high tone of moral indignation, used too often, is an ugly thing” (12). At the same time she is of the opinion that “[t]here don’t [sic] seem to be many instances of the pure straightforward” (24). Later on in the novel, Jen’s boyfriend at the time begins his “political essay” with: “Some things cannot be said too often, and some can” (66). In short, Adler emphasizes the need for people to form and express opinions, but also the importance of critical thinking. Otherwise, what will be left are just monotonous “bon mots spliced together” that serve no purpose in the great scheme of things.

Alienation and Technology

In *Speedboat*, alienation originates in cynicism, idleness, and the overall sense of purposelessness that is felt for and aimed at the progress of society. Jen talks about her group of friends as if they have all been overcome by this purposelessness: “Dispersed as we all are, though, what we seem to have entirely in common is a time, a quality of meaning no harm, and a sense that among highly urban and ambitious people we are trying to lead some semblance of decent lives” (26). Adler tries to describe an essence of idleness that has come from the feeling that there is no purpose in competing with the progress and ambition of contemporary society. Jen and her friends try not to draw attention to themselves, leading lives that to all appearances seem appropriate in the eyes of society. They are unobtrusive and they comply with what is considered decent, and as a result there is a notion of separation pervading their lives: there is distance from the people who are not alike, dispersion of the group of friends who are alike, and a growing divide between the self and the ideal life that society encourages you to lead. They have started to distance themselves from the world and each other, something that leads to alienation.

Adler further discusses the divide between people, with an implied distrustful attitude toward people in general, when Jen with matter-of-fact assertiveness talks about the fact that people cannot always like each other: “I often meet people who do not like me or each other. It doesn’t always matter. I keep on smiling, talking. . . . My dislike has

no consequences. It accrues only in my mind – like preserves on a shelf or guns zeroing in, and never firing” (36). By not talking to the people she feels are of a different opinion than herself, Jen avoids possible conflicts that can arise when people talk about their differences or standpoints in various matters. Once more, Adler touches upon the contrastive nature of everyday life that Lefebvre presents: she advocates critical thinking and discussion, but she is not inclined to be the one moderating it. Illusions of friendship are kept but shattered by Jen’s perceptiveness when she utters that “[t]here is a difference, of course, between real sentiment and the trash of shared experience” (97). Her statement suggests that having “shared experience” does not entail friendship. Rather, friendships are built on mutual affection, something that seems to be lacking in Jen’s increasingly superficial surroundings. Her observations of life and society affirm that people are growing apart, which in turn is giving sustenance to alienation.

Alienation is not only a conscious, or unconscious, choice in the society that Jen lives in. In the examples above, there are indications that people themselves can be seen to have been involved in their own withdrawal from society, either gradually or perhaps instantly. In addition, Jen also gives an example of a scenario when alienation has been forced upon someone by deliberate exclusion:

I knew someone who used to go to sleep counting, not sheep, but people against whom he had grievances – bullies from childhood, kindergarten teachers, back to nannies even, bosses, employees, anybody awful up to the preceding day. When they were rounded up in his mind, he would machine-gun them down. If it turned out he had left out anybody, he would have to start all over. Round them up. Gun them down again. Slept without difficulty. Judgment Day may be compiled of private arsenals like these. (36-37)

Due to him being mistreated in his past, the man is implied to have become introvert and unwilling to let go of things. Presumably, he has stopped talking about his thoughts and feelings, making him more detached from the people around him. Adler makes a crude rendering of a possible future American society where people avoid rejection by withdrawing from each other. In retrospect it can be seen as an uncanny prediction of the extreme consequences that being, or feeling, alone can have (consider the school

massacres in Columbine and Virginia Tech for example). A key word here is *machine-gun*, which is a good metaphor for the destructive era that comprises Jen's everyday. Her life is pervaded by mass-production that is making everything disposable, and will ultimately destroy human relationships. Mass-production also makes electronic products more accessible, making it easier for people to hide behind cameras, guns, or on the other end of a phone-line. Individuals are made, or can choose to be, increasingly invisible by not having to engage directly with their surroundings.

Technology is hence subtly integrated in the narrative to symbolize alienation, and the growing stress factor pervading the everyday life of Jen Fain. The telephone is one of the clearest examples of how the advances in technology have caused people to become more distant from each other: Jen calls a collect call to her present boyfriend but the connection is so bad that they are constantly interrupted by lines being crossed and interwoven in their conversation, and it ends with them giving up the conversation (145-148); a man and woman get engaged over the phone while the "switchboard operators" are listening in, having followed their relationship wavering back and forth for half a year (22); a man and a woman flirt over the phone but experience difficulties in understanding each other (14). Direct visible contact is taken away here and thus the ability to interpret facial expressions and gestures. Someone appearing on TV still has the power to convey emotion through moving picture and it is easier to feel affinity with and sympathy for this person, referring back to the facilitation of "brain-washing" that is supposedly achieved by mass-media, as proposed above in this essay. The telephone works in the opposite way: the ability to perceive emotion, meaning, and underlying sarcasm is often reduced when a visible connection is taken away. Misunderstandings thus become more frequent, leading to a widening gap between people.

The alienation caused by the telephone is further incorporated into the novel when a man lets out that he has stopped answering his phone "on principle" (36), and when Jen takes Valium from time to time and ignores the constant ringing of the phone (68). They both try to protect their privacy, something that can certainly be difficult in a society where everyone is expected to always be available. Jen also puts focus on what role the telephone has played in society other than having served as a means to bring people closer together: she discusses the absurd nature of the thriller genre. She argues that there is no comprehensible reason why people call from phone booths with crucial

“information” that is impossible to talk about over the phone, and when “the hero” finally gets there, the informant is almost always dead or dying (100). The phone booth can be seen as a metaphor of how technology is destroying human relationships due to increased distances. The booth is confining and excluding, demonstrating how increasingly, man shields off the self from contact with the rest of the world. Jen’s unsympathetic attitude towards the phone booth in this case demonstrates how difficult it is to talk over a distance. It is possible that people will lose interest in one another if they are unable to have a conversation in person. They will slip further away from each other and perhaps never meet. Relationships are thus prevented from growing or even existing in the first place. Only technology, like the phone, will endure and remain.

The consumer culture has left its mark on *Speedboat* both in purely materialistic ways and more subtle ways of thinking and interacting with people, touched upon earlier in this essay. Affluence is portrayed in the form of lavish parties with congressmen, university professors and ambassadors. Jen’s group of friends go on vacation in the Caribbean and the Mediterranean, on the same island as a queen, and they party like the Bright Young Set in the novels of Evelyn Waugh. In spite of her seemingly extravagant lifestyle, Jen is an indecisive character for whom wealth and riches are not sufficient. Even though she is portrayed as being idle and apathetic when her own life is concerned, she does want to question moral, authority, and her peers. She sheds light on injustices in society, takes a critical stance toward war and people without opinion, but at the same time, she also wants to be a part of “the set.” She describes a dream she had “[w]hen [she] was last at [her] wit’s end” (37): “It was by no means a parable about capitalism and making money. I believe in both, and would not think of dreaming against either. Anyway, I do not dream in parables” (37). She emphasizes the idea that society is in fact “driven by a capitalist culture,” as formulated by Olson (12), and claims that people are brainwashed into wanting to make money. Money is what society is constructed by as well as an indicator of that you are someone of value in the society Jen lives in. Remarking that she does not dream in parables, she tries to convince herself that she is not against the capitalist culture. At the same time, she is subliminally criticizing herself for being a part of it.

More concretely, Adler demonstrates the impact of technology, consumerism and the throw-away culture in three life observations that Jen recounts. The first one is

about a Swiss family that has a yacht in the Caribbean. When they experience an unpleasant event where a priest takes a shower over the vegetables supposed to be used for dinner, they rethink their life situation: “They could not get over this. They thought of selling their boat again and returning to Geneva. The jet, the telephone, the boat, the train, the television. Dislocations” (41). Firstly, this demonstrates that by always being able to get what they want, people have become less forgiving, greedy and short fused. There is no room for mistakes and the person who makes one is easily replaced by someone else. Secondly, the quotation indicates that being in possession of many materialistic things does not entail satisfaction. Like Toffler and Lefebvre, Adler seems to claim that the family has taken their everyday for granted and they have lost their attachment to things, because everything is replaceable. In fact, lastly, the “unforgettable” event will also be replaced because the memory is tied to the boat and their present lifestyle. Selling their belongings and buying other material objects will be like exchanging a bad memory with a new one.

The second observation is about a family who lives on the island that has now become a resort for the well-off, the same island where Jen and her friends resort. Because the “islanders” were afraid of the sea, the women sold the beaches to the tourist who came “with their boats, and their architects, and their search for an unspoiled sea” (91). But their fortune did not last long and “[w]ithin ten years, their sons and husbands had spent all the rest of the money, on cars, appliances, and schemes to become richer still. They were poor again” (91). In addition to material things becoming replaceable, this quotation emphasizes that the ideal society is based on the idea that people should continue to make more and more money, and then spend it to nourish the capitalist and consumer culture. The islanders start to idealize the lifestyle of their affluent visitors and it becomes easy for them to forget, or disregard, their own culture. They want to be something they are not because they make the assumption that their lifestyle is not good enough in the eyes of the consumer society, in the eyes of their guests. As discussed above, the gap is not only widened within a specific society, but also between different cultures and societies. Ultimately, lifestyles and cultures are also disposable and replaceable, and everything can disappear if life is not valued but merely taken for granted.

Disposability entails a growing need for new things when you have become accustomed to having them. It can also devalue what one already has, which leads to Jen's third observation: "Summer. The speedboat was serious. The young tycoon was serious about it, as he was serious about his factories, his wife, his children, his parties, his work, his art collection, his resort" (77). The detachment from other human beings is emphasized by the fact that "the young tycoon" places his family next to his material belongings, dehumanizing the wife and children, and turning them into replaceable things in line with the others. With her three life observations, Jen manages to point to the throw-away culture and its subsequent neglect, but also the speed at which this happens. Adler alludes to acceleration by incorporating means of transportation in the novel: there are airplanes, buses, the subway, bicycles, boats, a Vespa, and especially noticeable is the very object that gave name to her novel: the speedboat.

As demonstrated in the novel, making the world more accessible through means of transportation is not necessarily a good thing. Airplanes are used in warfare, boats are used for colonial purposes as well as recreational purposes for the rich, and Jen's friend "[rides] his bicycle over a cliff" (168). Some people can afford these commodities when others cannot, further widening the gap between people and cultures. As the title suggests, the speedboat is used as a metaphor for something bigger:

And then, at speed, the boat, at its own angle to the sea, began to hit each wave with flat, hard, jarring thuds, like the heel of a hand against a tabletop. As it slammed along, the Italians sat, ever more low and loose, on their hard seats, while the American lady, in her eagerness, began to bounce with anticipation over every little wave. The boat scudded hard; she exaggerated every happy bounce. Until she broke her back. (77)

Abruptly, Adler uses her title "character" to demonstrate the consequences of not slowing down in a society that is constantly changing. Moving at high speed prevents people from seeing what is happening around them. They take things for granted, they care only for themselves, and do not think about what consequences that can come from abandoning values, material things or other people. The people in *Speedboat* neglect the everyday around them and cannot see "the point," the big picture, and they become

estranged from their selves and their surroundings. The few characters who have realized that there is an increasing gap between all human beings often accept that this is the way of life instead of trying to bring people closer together. The growing alienation and individualism is addressed by a disheartened Jen Fain: “When I wonder what it is that we are doing – in this brownstone, on this block, with this paper – the truth is probably that we are fighting for our lives” (68).

Conclusion

In *Speedboat*, Renata Adler portrays a society that is heading more toward an emotional dystopia rather than a world of hopes and dreams. Instead of depicting a world and its characters in detail, protagonist Jen Fain is created to represent a consciousness of the time by sharing her inner thoughts with the reader. Occasionally, she is straightforward in sharing her opinions but more often she presents the reader with ambiguous, and fragmentary, thoughts constructed by repetitive and laconic language. These thoughts are easier to analyze when they are referenced to what the American society looked like at the time of Jen’s narration.

The historical context in this essay has largely to do with postmodern literary theory because the nature of Adler’s novel is highly postmodern. Why certain literary stylistics like fragmentation, dehumanization and repetitive language are favored by a certain group of writers can be explained by what the state of the world and the society looked like at that time. Vice versa, the state of the world and society can be illuminated by the style of a literary work. Fragmentation is one example of how a literary technique is connected to the perception of society. Because of the “speed-up” in society, people are prevented from keeping focus on one specific thing because it is almost instantly taken over by another. The “story” the reader is presented with in the novel is only observations that seem to be randomly brought together. Thus, just as in real life, it can never be known what has been cut out because it has never been observed. In the novel, fragmentation is used to remind the reader of what it does not know, and what it is missing by thinking too much about itself instead of paying attention to what is going on in the world. This is a result of the fact that the “throw-away culture” prevents people from forming attachments and focus, by letting disposability become a standard way of living.

Toffler's "throw-away culture," including mass-production, is never given a palpable role in *Speedboat*, but by analyzing the thoughts of Jen Fain it is possible to discern how it is manifested in her society. The most obvious consequence that has come from mass-production is that people have lost their ability to relate to things and consequently become more withdrawn. Detachment is not only shown through the disposability of material objects, but also through the inability to form or express opinions as well as the inability to keep relationships to other people. Presumably, the detachment is caused by the "brainwashing" conducted by TV and mass-media, which pressures people to adapt to an increasingly superficial society instead of encouraging individuals to be proud of who they are. Furthermore, advances in technology are nourishing consumerism. Taking the comfort of living in an affluent society for granted is demonstrated by letting the phone booth and speedboat serve as metaphors for the subsequent estrangement and self-destruction that technology and consumerism are leading to, that is to say, in Jen's world. The alienation can be one's own choice or it can happen when someone becomes someone else's disposable "thing". Alienation has come to be because the gaps between people and societies have grown wider as a result of being part of the throw-away mentality.

Jen mixes observations that are seemingly unimportant with skepticism and criticism against the society she lives in. Presumably, Adler is simply trying to show the reader what has been forgotten and what has been taken for granted, be it the raccoon in the park, the unfortunate prowler who sleeps in the entrance hall of Jen's brownstone, the six Kevins or the two Wendys who ride a school bus, or just life in general. The list goes on in *Speedboat*. It can be a warning not to forget "to be a major character in your own life," and an exhortation to have opinions and express them. Ultimately, everyone must slow down and look at what they are missing, find the point and enjoy the ride.

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