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NOT LIMITED OR DEFINED BUT CONSTRUCTED AND INTERNALIZED: EXPLORING OBJECTIVATION, INSTITUTIONALIZATION, AND LEGITIMATION IN DONALD BARTHELME'S "THE BALLOON" AND "I BOUGHT A LITTLE CITY"

Abstract

Donald Barthelme's short fiction is marked by a dashing concentration on everyday life, construction of meaning, and plurality of reality in addition to his playful, metafictional, and fragmentary style. Although a fertile ground for exploring sociopolitical matters, particularly in the mid and late 20th century America, the review of studies on Barthelme's works highlights a lacuna in the application of conceivably pertinent sociological and political theories on Barthelme's short stories. Accordingly, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) could be a congruous theory with Barthelme's sociological concerns in his short fiction. In their treatise, Berger and Luckmann see reality as a kind of "collective fiction" that is constructed by the processes of institutionalization, socialization, and everyday social interaction, particularly through language. In this article, we

read "The Balloon" and "I Bought a Little City," which are selected thematically, in light of "society as objective reality" through the concepts of objectivation, institutionalization, and legitimation. Linking literature and sociology, we aim to pinpoint how the stories observe, unveil, and potentially critique construction of meaning and the real workings of the processes in the social construction of reality.

Keywords: American short story, Donald Barthelme, social construction of reality, institutionalization, objectivation, postmodernist fiction

Introduction

American fiction in the 1960s and the 1970s saw the emergence of a range of works, which came to be known widely as postmodernist (sometimes also called postmodern, regardless of the various definitions provided for the term), by writers such as Donald Barthelme. Generally, metafiction, irony, intertextuality, self-reflexivity, pastiche or parody, and fragmentation are among the many techniques that have been associated with this challenging category of fiction. Barthelme's short fiction is marked by a striking concentration on everyday life, construction of meaning, and plurality of reality in addition to his playful, metafictional, and fragmentary style. According to Larry McCaffery, Barthelme's metafiction is closely linked with his thematic engagement with "the difficulties of expressing a total vision of oneself in a fragmenting universe, the failure of most of our social and linguistic systems, the difficulties of making contact or sustaining relationships with others" and critique of "the language process itself and of the symbol-making activity of modern man" (100). Furthermore, McCaffery points out the paradoxical condition of Barthelme's characters and on a similar note, Richard Gray argues that "Barthelme's fiction constantly fluctuates between immersion in trash culture and the impulse to evade, an impulse that finds its emotional issue in irony, disappointment and a free-floating nostalgia" (713).

In an interesting article in 1985, Barthelme highlights the notion of "not-knowing" in fiction writing and elaborates on his point by spontaneously writing fragments of a story as the example of the procedure. He also takes up the criticisms leveled at the "alleged Postmodernists" that suggested this kind of writing "has turned its back on the world" (Barthelme, "Not-Knowing" 513). Furthermore, he discusses three problems, which occupy him in his own fiction, including:

1. Art's own project of "restoring freshness to a much-handled language";
2. "The political and social contamination of language by its use in manipulation of various kinds over time"; and
3. "The pressure on language from contemporary culture in the broadest sense" (i.e., commercial culture; "Not-Knowing" 513).

Barthelme concludes that in his view, art is always "a meditation upon external reality rather than a representation of external reality or a jackleg attempt to 'be' external reality" ("Not-Knowing" 521). These concerns articulated by Barthelme himself could help us form a solid base in approaching his oeuvre. Throughout the last decades, critics have focused on the metafictional sphere as well as the biographical, historical, and political dimensions of Barthelme's fiction.

Using Barthelme's fiction as an example, Alan Wilde argues that while the modern ironist "locates" themselves at a distance from the presented world, "the postmodern ironist is typically, involved *in*, though not necessarily *with*, that world" (47). According to him, there is an indecision about the meaning and relations of things in postmodern fiction and it is also important to note that the preoccupation with meaning is not about its absence but lack of (or "pretensions to") certainties.

Endorsing Wilde's reading, Brian McHale emphasizes the ontological status of Barthelme's fiction in his concerns with the acceptance of a world. Moreover, McHale highlights the significance of social satire in Barthelme's antirealistic fiction. According to him, Barthelme's "The Balloon" "preserves the two-level ontological structure of metaphor (literal frame of reference, metaphorical frame of reference), but . . . remains implicit, disseminated throughout the text" (McHale 140). McHale argues that fictions such as Barthelme's "The Indian Uprising" "participate in that very general tendency in the intellectual life of our time toward viewing reality as *constructed* in and through our languages, discourses, and semiotic systems" (164).

In an engrossing book titled *Donald Barthelme: An Exhibition* (1991), Jerome Klinkowitz particularly focuses on Barthelme's *The Dead Father* (1975) and noting his other stories argues that in Barthelme's narrative, "information itself is treated as a matter of disjunction; meaning proves to be disruptive when discerned, which encourages the reader to find enjoyment in the easy play of

signs rather than searching for what they signify" (7). Moreover, Klinkowitz recognizes a movement from "apparency" to "effacement" in the works of Barthelme in which the initial bare style and structure bring about a "seeming transparency of narration whereby his fictions read like reports about and comments on our commonly shared world" (9), while at the same time drawing on particular social subjects.

To delve deep into Barthelme's sociopolitical concerns in his works, Paul Maltby's enlightening book, *Dissident Postmodernists* (1991), is a great source. Maltby attempts to highlight how postmodern works are capable of expressing a critical stance that confronts the contemporary politics of "late-capitalism." In his sociopolitical study, he addresses and answers Frederick Jameson's critique that entailed postmodernism was a way to consolidate "late-capitalism" lacking a critical touch. Going against the grain, he elaborately shows how Barthelme's fiction resists the "embourgeoisement" of a late-capitalist society in which "hyperproduction and hyperconsumption" prevails and individuals become absorbed in the "dreck" culture. Analyzing a number of Barthelme's short stories and his well-known novel, *The Snow White* (1967), Maltby maintains that Barthelme uses the culture of late-capitalism against itself and challenges the mass-communicated, popularized, and commercialized products of culture that feed the individual in order to affirm the bourgeoisie hegemony.

As the social approach in our study is also linked with the political sphere and since Maltby primarily focuses on the institutionalized concepts and the ideology of "late-capitalism" and consequently, Barthelme's critique of that culture, his discussions can be integrated in our readings to add depth to the presented deliberations.

The review of literature on Barthelme's works highlights a lacuna in the application of sociological and political theories to Barthelme's works, particularly with regard to construction of reality and everyday life. Accordingly, linking literature and sociology, we attempt to read Barthelme's "The Balloon" and "I Bought a Little City" in light of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (henceforth referred to as *TSCR*, 1966), focusing on "society as objective reality" through the concepts of "objectivation," "institutionalization," and "legitimation." The purpose of this reading is to pinpoint how the stories observe, unveil, and potentially critique construction of meaning and the real workings of the processes in the social construction of reality. To our

knowledge, no studies have focused on the application of such sociological theories on Barthelme's works, underlining the novelty of our reading. The results can add to the valuable but infrequent research on Barthelme's short fiction and pave the way for further sociological analyses of his and other contemporary writers' works.

In the following section, to establish our theoretical basis, we aim to provide a concise look at Berger and Luckmann's discussions through their concepts categorized under "society as objective reality" in *TSCR*.

Discussion

In an introduction to *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1966), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann lay the basis of their treatise: the sociology of knowledge "must concern itself with the social construction of reality" (27). As they provide the review of the studies related to sociology of knowledge, particularly those by Max Scheler and Karl Mannheim, they assert that there is a need to include an "empirical level" to what has been previously theorized. Influenced by several thinkers including Alfred Schutz, Karl Marx, George Mead, and Emile Durkheim (to whose theory they introduce a "dialectical perspective"), they attempt a "systematic theoretical reasoning" to study social construction of reality, turning their focus to everyday life. According to Ian Hacking, "their book, then, is about the social construction of our sense of, feel for, experience of, and confidence in, commonsense reality" (25). This treatise is, consequently, considered pioneering as it set a foundation that numerous later works in different fields were built on and continue to do so. However, it is vitally significant to note that they *never* claim a general social constructionism accounting for everything in the world as a construct.

Noted by Hubert Knoblauch and René Wilke in their study of the reception and impact of *TSCR*, "as a common denominator, it allows various disciplines to relate to one another and to translate from various academic vernaculars" (60). Thus, the scope of the arguments could be extended to different fields including literature. Nevertheless, *TSCR* has been very limitedly used in reading literary works, particularly fiction. One of the few examples is an article titled "Everything's Interesting: Cormac McCarthy and the Social Construction of Reality" by Forrest Robinson, published in 2014.

What Robinson is most concerned with is exploring meaning-making, illusions to control and bear reality, and the shattering of these constructions in Cormac McCarthy's novels: "Bondage to perennial conflict is thus the yield on the incapacity to live in the harsh light of our true condition, which is precisely not to know what our true conditions is" (Robinson 87). He highlights McCarthy's focus on "what life is" and shows the emergence of this drive in "individual behavior" and "social institutions" in his work. In an article exploring the implications of social construction of reality for American studies, R. Gordon Kelly notes that "literature, in the broad sense, could be approached as meaning-making, meaning-sustaining, or meaning-subverting activity, in useful contrast to the mirror analogy and affording a means, as well, to circumvent the invidious distinction between great works, so called, and less valued cultural products consigned to the opprobrium of 'mass culture,' 'popular literature,' and the like" (54). In the following paragraphs, we will focus on Berger and Luckmann's main notions in the first half of their book, which will be later used to read the two selected stories by Barthelme.

Human beings are conscious of the plural realities of the world among which one stands as the "reality par excellence," the reality of everyday life, which comes with a taken-for-granted status. This reality seems as "ordered" and "already objectified" to us and language gives us these objectifications and postulates the order in which everyday life makes sense and becomes meaningful to us. Accordingly, "Language marks the coordinates of my life in society and fills that life with meaningful objects" (Berger and Luckmann 36). Moreover, we experience and order everyday reality through our own circle of interest by the "pragmatic motive" and each create a world of our own being. Now, this world is also shared with others which makes it intersubjective and likewise, other people recognize similar objects in their world and may also have a different view of this common world.

According to Berger and Luckmann, we use the common language which is based on everyday life to objectify our experiences; hence, we "'translate' the non-everyday experiences back into the paramount reality of everyday life" (40). Furthermore, another aspect of the world of everyday life is its spatiotemporality; although the spatial aspect has a social dimension, temporality is more important in this discussion as it is a hard-wired property of our consciousness. The temporal structure is not only imposed on the sequences of our everyday life but also our biography in the general sense. Therefore, empirically, without

such a structure the sense of reality we hold in our everyday life (the normal and known world) would be shattered, something probably much experimented by contemporary writers in fiction.

Berger and Luckmann highlight the role of language in our everyday life and formation of reality, especially through "signification" and "objectivation." Like all sign systems, language has an objective quality as we encounter it as an external facticity and consequently, its patterns are imposed on us. Through language, we "objectify," "typify," and "anonymize" experiences, which make them meaningful not only subjectively to ourselves but also objectively to other people. Language can transcend spatial, temporal, and social aspects and can "make present" absent objects restrained by these dimensions. Furthermore, "language is capable of transcending the reality of everyday life altogether. It can refer to experiences pertaining to finite provinces of meaning, and it can span discrete spheres of reality" (Berger and Luckmann 54).

In this regard, in an article exploring the role of language in sociology in light of Berger and Luckmann's views that he believes attempt a "sociological situating of language," Jens Leonhoff points to the lineage from Georg Hegel to Wilhelm Dilthey and Hans Freyer and notes that, "[b]y being detached from the indexicality of the 'here and now,' meaning becomes available beyond interactive contexts and the actors who produce them" (107). Several instances of exploring such a capacity of language could be traced in literary works, for example, the technique of "defamiliarization" as used to present common objects in an unfamiliar way to open new perspectives towards the "automatized" quality of everyday objectivations.

The first point on discussing human objective reality which consists of two significant processes of institutionalization and legitimation is the relation of human beings with their environment. Accordingly, Berger and Luckmann believe that unlike other mammals, human beings not only interrelate with their natural environment but also with their peculiar socio-cultural order provided by the significant others: "While it is possible to say that man has a nature, it is more significant to say that man constructs his own nature, or more simply, that man produces himself" (67). Nonetheless, the "self-production" of human beings is necessarily social as they collectively create a human environment with its specific sociocultural and psychological formations, and it is never a solitary enterprise. Habitualization is the process before any institutionalization

as all human activities can be habitualized which provides psychological relief through repetition directing the undirected biological drives that could bring about tensions in human life. With less decision-making in habitualized activities, it also becomes the background for innovation.

According to Berger and Luckmann, "institutionalization occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors" (72). Moreover, an institution's typifications are always shared among the members of that social group and "the institution itself typifies individual actors as well as individual actions" (Berger and Luckmann 72). This also implies the historicity of institutions as they are formed through a shared history, which in fact, has led to their production.

In addition, given that institutions establish "predefined patterns of conduct," they control human activity as well. In the preface of *Language and Control* (1979), a compilation of essays by Roger Fowler, Bob Hodge, Gunther Kress, and Tony Trew, it is pointed out that "[t]his control is effected by both regulation and by constitution: by explicit manipulation and by the creation of an apparent 'natural world' in which inequitable relations and processes are presented as given and inevitable" (2). Hence, when a part of human activity is institutionalized, it is already under social control; however, further "control mechanisms" may be required if the first order control falls short.

When two individuals form an interaction of their own, typifying their reciprocal conduct and roles, they are not fully institutionalized yet. However, when a third party, and later other members, join this institutional world, it is passed onto the others. Therefore, historicity is introduced to the group and a new quality is acquired, that of "objectivity": "the institutions are now experienced as possessing a reality of their own, a reality that confronts the individual as an external and coercive fact" (Berger and Luckmann 76). In other words, the constructed world detaches itself from its quality of being constructed when it is passed onto next generations, crystalizing or hardening the objectivity of this institutional world not just for the newly added members but for all members. There is no longer talking about "how we do things" but "how things are done," it becomes *the* world.

In this process a crucial point is not forgetting that although through objectivation, that is "the process by which the externalized products of human activity attain the character of objectivity" (Berger and Luckmann 78), such a

world may appear as comprising an external objectivity, it is produced and constructed by the human beings. In addition, the relationship between the producer (human beings collectively) and the product (the social world) is always dialectical: the world is produced, it is then objectivated, and later "retrojected" into the consciousness of the social members. Thus, as Berger and Luckmann put it, "*Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product*" (79). Barthelme's stories could be great examples of how, through the innovative embedded techniques, they remind the reader of the nature of this "objective reality," how it emerges and is produced as well as of the challenges to provoke further contemplation about how on another level, we construct our reality and tend to forget this fact.

Next, an institutional world needs "legitimation"—that is, the "ways by which it can be 'explained' and 'justified'" (Berger and Luckmann 79). As discussed above, when a social world is transmitted to next generations, they no longer have access to the original recollection of the creation and meaning of an institution; therefore, it is required to explain this meaning to them through different renderings of legitimizing ways. Furthermore, the new generations are to follow a set of rules that have been set up for them by others and this necessitates social control mechanisms to hold and claim authority over the members. As a result, the "logic" of institutions lies in the "reflective consciousness" and not "in the institutions and their external functionalities" (Berger and Luckmann 82). Language is the main instrument to provide such a logic and legitimize the institutional order as the individuals learn to perceive their social world as a "consistent whole" and will define further functionality according to this shared knowledge.

Although theoretical legitimations are influential at different times in the history of an institution, according to Berger and Luckmann, "the primary knowledge about the institutional order is knowledge on the pre-theoretical level" (83) where there is a knowledge that delineates the appropriate set of rules in a particular institution. In this regard, this knowledge defines and creates the roles to be played by the individuals in the context of a particular institution. Therefore, a very crucial point is that "since this knowledge is socially objectivated *as* knowledge, that is, as a body of generally valid truths about reality, any radical deviance from the institutional order appears as a departure from reality" (Berger and Luckmann 83). Put differently, the constructions of an institution are held as objective truth and the integrated reality of the world, validating

this knowledge as something natural and not human-made. This knowledge orders the world into objects through language and language-based cognition and the knowledge about society is realized as understanding the social reality that is objectivated while this reality is incessantly produced.

As actions become objectified, they comprise parts of self-consciousness, the "social self," based on social typifications of performances and experienced as different and even confronting the total self. In this regard, "[t]he actor identifies with the socially objectivated typifications of conduct *in actu*, but re-establishes distance from them as he reflects about his conduct afterwards" (Berger and Luckmann 91). When types are attributed to individuals, roles are the types of individuals or actors within their social stock of knowledge. Thus, the roles are objectified linguistically, and institutions are incorporated in subjective experience through them as the individuals perform, play roles, to take part in a social world. The same processes of habitualization, objectivation, and control in the formation of an institutional world apply to the roles as they represent the order established by the institution in question.

Berger and Luckmann use drama as their example to explain the roles: as a play is made possible when the actors perform the written script, "the realization of the drama depends upon the reiterated performances of its prescribed roles by living actors" (92). In a similar way, the performance of the "programmed" conduct in a given institution through the roles enables that institution to exist. Furthermore, symbolic objectifications which need to be constantly included or "brought to life" in human activities represent institutions, in other words, they are performed or practiced becoming alive. To solve the problem of integration, some roles, particularly in political or religious institutions, are represented to uphold the totality of the social world.

In view of this framework, we will explore meaning-making, objectivation, institutionalization, and legitimation in Barthelme's "The Balloon" and "I Bought a Little City" in the following paragraphs.

Meaning-making, objectivation, and legitimation in "The Balloon"

Donald Barthelme's "The Balloon" (published in the New Yorker in 1966 and later collected in *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* in 1968 and *Sixty Stories* in 1981) is one of his most anthologized and early short stories. It is the story of

an unknown narrator with an elusive "I" who sets a giant balloon afloat, covering Manhattan, New York. The balloon becomes a source of much perturbation to the citizens who attempt to discover its meaning, purpose, or truth until the narrator reveals the answer in the final paragraph to the reader. Much critical discussion has been focused on the balloon, seeing it as the object of art in the contemporary world, whose individual objectivity and autonomous existence must be noted.

In this regard, Klinkowitz suggests that "[t]he key to Barthelme's new aesthetic for fiction is that the work may stand for itself, that it need not yield to complete explication of something else in the world but may exist as an individual object (. . .)" (80). Moreover, Maltby states that "the balloon assumes a life of its own quite independently of its creator's intentions" (44). Maltby also addresses the "neo-formalist" reading of the story, which upholds that a work of art should be respected as a "concrete particular" without forcing meaning on it; he argues that seeing it as "expression of an aesthetic ideal" is correct but "incomplete" since it could be explained within a "broader sociopolitical framework" (45). Maltby suggests that Barthelme's evoking advertising as a discourse to define the balloon could refer to the containing processes by the dominant discourse and that "the purposelessness of the autonomous work of art has value as a means of resisting incorporation through the mediation of a culturally dominant discourse" (45).

Highlighting other supposed "critical opinion" issued about the balloon in the story and how they are embedded in the text with "irregular type-spacing," making them look detached, Maltby argues that "these remarks look arbitrary, they resemble graffiti" (45). Maltby groups Barthelme among whom he calls "dissident postmodernists," arguing that "for the postmodernist writer, the 'real' is essentially non-significant (it does not speak for itself), and the search for meaning, the endeavor to interpret the world, is perceived as a process of fictionalizing reality, of 'storifying' it" (37–38). Accordingly, endorsing his view and opening a sociological gate to the story, "The Balloon" can be also seen in light of Berger and Luckmann's notions in *TSCR*.

In the beginning of the story after explaining the expansion of the balloon, the narrator ends the first paragraph with a cut-off sentence, "That was the situation, then" and continues, "But it is wrong to speak of 'situations,' implying sets of circumstances leading to some resolution, some escape of tension, there were

no situations, simply the balloon hanging there—" (Barthelme, *Sixty Stories* 53). In this way the narrator seems motivated to move against the "natural" order of phenomena in their causal relationship at work both in conventional stories and human life. Instead, he directs our attention towards the balloon itself as a "concrete particular" at this particular moment. Nonetheless, the reactions of the citizens begin immediately after that.

A plethora of ideas, interpretations, and attempts to assign meaning to the balloon are presented while we read about the New Yorkers' confrontation with the balloon through the narrator who intervenes to report, comment on, criticize, or even nullify the discussions. A significant point about the balloon is that when observed, the people in Barthelme's story world are more interested in its sign-value rather than its material use-value. According to Berger and Luckmann, "signification" is an important case of objectivation that entails human production of signs or appropriation of other signs to communicate subjective meanings.

Also highly noted in discussions of Jean Baudrillard and other early postmodernist critics, the signs accumulated in different systems become "floating signifiers" detached from their original subjective expressions. In this regard, the balloon can be seen as literally a "floating" signifier, which the people of the story attempt to define or trace its original source. However, we are reminded that although "there was a certain amount of argumentation about the 'meaning' of the balloon, this subsided, because we have learned not to insist on meanings, and they are rarely even looked for now, except in cases involving the simplest, safest phenomena" (Barthelme, *Sixty Stories* 54). We read that even though the purpose of the balloon was not to "amuse children," they are those not concerned with its "meaning" and those who are "accustomed to the city's flat, hard skin" (Barthelme, *Sixty Stories* 55) are now enjoying physically exploring the upper surface of the balloon and playing on it. The world as they have acquired the knowledge of through their significant others had never had an element like the balloon, it is something that has not been predefined for them.

Larry McCaffery sees "The Balloon" as "a wonderfully deft and amusing allegory about the status of an art object's relationship to both its creator and its public" (105). In a sociological view, it could be argued that in Barthelme's story, the giant balloon is something new, out of ordinary, beyond the habitualized for the citizens who share a history that solidifies their institutional view which

tends to present a "natural world" with established and given processes and relations. The people look for a point of reference as the narrator tells us that "[t]he apparent purposelessness of the balloon was vexing (as was the fact that it was 'there' at all)" (Barthelme, *Sixty Stories* 55) and adds, in a satirical tone toward advertisement, that "had we painted, in great letters, 'LABORATORY TESTS PROVE' or '18% MORE EFFECTIVE' on the sides of the balloon" (Barthelme, *Sixty Stories* 55), this would not have seemed as chaotic as it became.

Such a comment could be approached through the sociology of knowledge. In his article, Jochen Achilles states that Barthelme "exposes the contemporary dilemma of the pervasive need for guidelines and normative concepts on the one hand and of their questionable legitimacy on the other" (107). By gaining an objective status, the produced and circulated knowledge with the eye-catching labels of "laboratory" or percentages provide a feeling of comfort for people to perceive an objective reality in their everyday life. The point that the balloon resists "cultural integration" (Maltby 45) could be viewed according to the discussion of Berger and Luckmann. In this regard, the introduction of the balloon to the society running on taken-for-granted meaning-systems as objective reality and the "habitual modes of perception promoted by those meaning-systems" (Maltby 45) could be seen as an act to show the forgotten fact that reality is constructed by humans, it is not something given or natural.

In the story itself, we can read different critical opinion directed towards the balloon: "One man might consider that the balloon had to do with the notion sullied, as in the sentence *The big balloon sullied the otherwise clear and radiant Manhattan sky*" (Barthelme, *Sixty Stories* 55). His view is explained by the narrator to show what he thinks is that the balloon is something that is intruding their everyday life by blocking their sky. Then the narrator invalidates this argument pointing to the "dark and ugly" January sky. Returning to Berger and Luckmann's arguments, the reason someone would see the balloon as an intrusion could be explained in the disorder it poses on the patterned and habitualized life where the sky, whether dark or bright, creates a feeling of order to life. Habitualized life is the precondition for institutionalization since it provides psychological relief through repetition and puts tension-creating drives under control. According to Berger and Luckmann, when institutions acquire objectivity, they "are now experienced as possessing a reality of their own, a reality that confronts the individual as an external and coercive fact" (76). Thus, for the

citizens confronting the situation, the balloon appears as something unreal as it does not fit their definition of reality.

Another view explored by the narrator is that one may consider the balloon "as if it were part of a system of unanticipated rewards . . . a brilliantly heroic 'muscle and pluck' experience, even if an experience poorly understood" (Barthelme, *Sixty Stories* 56). Although more positive, the significant part of this view is seeing it in a "system," which again renders resolving the problem of understanding the balloon in a resort to order. A causal relation and other ideas are also introduced with human beings defining the balloon in relation to their position in relation to it. Before the listing of fragments of disordered views in quotations, the subjective experience is also put forward as an option. What is finally suggested as an admiring quality of the balloon is "that it was not limited, or defined" (Barthelme, *Sixty Stories* 57).

Maltby maintains that the indefinability of the balloon "hits at the liberating possibilities of a way of life *alternative* to a 'rigidly patterned' social existence" (46). This could directly correspond to Berger and Luckmann's discussion of the threat of introduction of alternative symbolic universes to the dominant and institutionalized reality. The acts of "reading," "interpreting," and "assigning meaning" directed toward the balloon, which are interestingly put forward by different groups and media, can be seen as what Berger and Luckmann refer to as "reality-maintenance procedures." According to *TSCR*, the dominant power with its own definition of reality removes, silences, or integrates rival voices in order to nip the danger of alteration in the bud.

Now the entrancing capacity of Barthelme's balloon is that rather than establishing a new form of meaning-system which endangers the dominant system, it defies the very processes of meaning-making by calling attention to their constructed nature. The vexing power of the balloon is in that it cannot be easily defined, silenced (it covers a large area seen by many people), removed, or integrated which pinpoints the "precarious" nature of constructed reality. There is nothing written on the balloon, no sign ascribed to it, it exists in itself; it is purposeless (until it is given a purpose at the end by its creator), lacking the fundamental element of meaning-systems.

After strenuous pondering and effort to find its meaning or reach a consensus about the balloon, the object in itself with its possibility to shape shift and offer the possibility of change is highlighted. The balloon is to remind us of the

fact that the human systems of meaning are produced and maintained in a way that makes them appear objective and that there is always a chance to change:

> This ability of the balloon to shift its shape, to change, was very pleasing, especially to people whose lives were rather rigidly patterned, persons to whom change, although desired, was not available. The balloon, for the twenty-two days of its existence, offered the possibility, in its randomness, of mislocation of the self, in contradistinction to the grid of precise, rectangular pathways under our feet. (Barthelme, *Sixty Stories* 57)

McCaffery suggests that "the balloon effectively provides a sense of freedom and a moment of distraction from the mundane, stifling effects of reality" (106–07). What he refers to as "freedom . . . in confronting experience" (McCaffery 107) can be expanded to the sociological notion of Berger and Luckmann that there is a dialectical relationship between human beings as the producers and the social world as the product. All of the analysis and interpretations given for the balloon are human production to make sense of the chaotic element in their everyday life. Barthelme's awareness-raising mission in his "The Balloon" can be seen as foregrounding the constructed nature of what is perceived as reality and the fact that it is human-made and can be changed may be traceable in the direct address in his "Daumier": "It is easy to be satisfied if you get out of things what inheres in them, but you must look closely, take nothing for granted, let nothing become routine. You must fight against the cocoon of habituation which covers everything if you let it. There are always openings, if you can find them. There is always something to do" (Barthelme, *Sixty Stories* 227).

Wayne Stengel believes that "the balloon encourages the individual to lose the self in its surfaces, to relish a work's refusal to be interpreted, and to experience not only a continuing sensation of change and process but also an uninhabited sense of play that the intellectual demands of other forms preclude" (167). The final paragraph of the story where the narrator finally assigns the balloon's purpose to it is of great significance. With the return of an unknown, unnamed "you" addressed as a lover, the narrator states that "[t]he balloon, I said, is a spontaneous autobiographical disclosure, having to do with the unease I felt at your absence, and with sexual deprivation, but now that your visit to Bergen has been terminated, it is no longer necessary or appropriate" (Barthelme, *Sixty Stories* 58). What the narrator subjectively has felt in private became a "spontaneous autobiographical disclosure," it is the externalization of an internal feel-

ing, a construction of reality, which other members of the society attempt to understand and return to the order of their taken-for-granted institutional order. However, by resisting interpretations and integration and offering the possibility of change, the balloon does not allow the completion of the institutional process. The narrator addresses the opinions and meaning-making, disrupting the processes of integration as legitimizing apparatus to maintain the objectivated institutional reality until citizens get a glimpse of the constructed reality of their dialectical relationship with life and the pleasing feeling that all their rigid structures can shape shift or change.

Power, institutionalization, and construction of reality in "I Bought a Little City"

Similar to "The Balloon," Barthelme's "I Bought a Little City" was first published in the New Yorker in 1974 and later in his fifth short story collection, *Amateurs*, in 1976. It is the story of an unnamed first-person narrator (again similar to "The Balloon") who purchases a city in Texas with half of his fortune. There is no reason provided for the purchase (it is already bought when the story begins) and with a stress on not being "too imaginative," what follows next is the narrator's experience during the days he owned the city, made what he called "gradual" changes, and had to deal with the citizens and city planning issues.

Thomas Leitch suggests that "thematic analysis is largely irrelevant to Barthelme's work because his situations are themselves arbitrary and haphazard" (132). Nonetheless, several critics have put forward a few crucial takes on this story. Stengel believes that "the story satirizes corporate owners or professional managers who make decisions from afar that throw individual lives into unnecessary upheaval" (118). Moreover, on a metafictional level, one could see how Barthelme comments on the role of an author "playing God" with absolute enforcement of power provided that McCaffery highlights the relation of the author and their problems in producing fiction and the issues individuals face in figuring out and writing themselves in the real world. However, there may be a further sociological aspect to "I Bought a Little City."

Berger and Luckmann argue that when reality is objectivated for a group of people in an institutional world, they perceive it given and natural, forgetting that people themselves construct their reality in a dialectical relationship. As discussed above, "The Balloon" was seen as a reminder of this fact, the same

disruptive force can be identified in "I Bought a Little City," The balloon covered a part of New York and perplexed a lot of citizens, whereas in "I Bought a Little City," the whole city is bought and taken under control of the centralized power of an individual. Where the introduction of an undefinable object constructed by the narrator with a subjective attached meaning to the everyday life of citizens was seen as how objectivation of reality and legitimation of institutional order operate within the society in "The Balloon," "I Bought a Little City" can be seen touching upon the complexity of processes of institutionalization.

The citizens of Galveston, Texas, have a reality of their own before their city is purchased. Even though the new owner tries to "do it just gradually, very relaxed, no big changes overnight" (Barthelme, *Sixty Stories* 295), he introduces a new reality to the city and its citizens which constitutes his authorial power and construction of a new institutional world. What they had perceived as the way life had been suddenly changed by the sheer power of an individual who had bought the city. It is crucial to note how the power of ownership coming from capital equals the power of control. Commenting on "I Bought a Little City" and "The Captured Woman." Stengel suggests that "[i]n these stories, possession becomes a form of control" (118). This control comes with institutionalization of the human world and further legitimizing apparatuses may be required to uphold the institutional order. Another significant point is the role playing of the individuals: As the narrator becomes the authority of the city, the citizens become subordinates to him, resulting in what Marx would see as fetishism in relations between individuals. As the new reality is produced, roles are also formed.

One of the first and major changes that the narrator makes is asking the people of a whole block to move out in order to demolish their houses and build a park. The people are temporarily lodged in the "nicest hotel in town" and the narrator builds his park still not trying to be "imaginative." In this way, he is physically altering the citizens' reality. However, although he claims he subscribes to democracy, even the bongo-drums-playing man in the new park is bothering him. When new housing is developed for the displaced citizens, they are given structures with new shapes (like a jigsaw puzzle), but complaints come from some of the people who want to return to the format they had before, the rectangle shape which is more ordinary and habitual for them since it was in the reality they had been institutionalized into, or rather it was the reality of the shape of houses for them. To keep the order, the city owner agrees to these re-

quests and states, "I must say it improved the concept" (Barthelme, *Sixty Stories* 297). This could be seen as an act of legitimation as the provinces of meaning, which are potentially alternative options, are absorbed by the institutional order to reinforce its power. In opposition to the new format, the rectangle structure as a rival format is integrated into the new jigsaw model.

The next major incident is when the narrator, feeling that he is not using his full ownership and authoritative power and wondering if he was "enjoying" himself enough, goes out on the streets and shoots six thousand dogs. A man angry with this act comes to see him and threatens to bash his head with a pipe. The narrator manages this situation by saying that "I am the sole owner and I make all the rules" (Barthelme, *Sixty Stories* 298) and "I own the jail and the judge and the po-lice and the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union" (Barthelme, *Sixty Stories* 299). His actions, his introduced reality lack the ideological support needed to implement such changes. As a result, he resorts to his absolute controlling power over the police and judicatory body. Even though this saves him at that particular moment, it points out the fact that this could happen again. He lacks a systematized agenda to explain his actions in the city, leading to his realization that he has failed. Had he constructed and propagated a belief that given the number of dogs in the city and for example, the danger from diseases they may carry, dogs have to be controlled for the safety of citizens—which he could then probably find supporters from different walks of the society—he probably could have successfully implemented his desire.

This is further intensified when he falls in love with a woman who is married. The already powerful institution of marriage cannot be broken by the narrator's mere playful and authoritative power as he seeks immediate results. After selling the city and taking a loss in the deal, he later ponders about what he has learned: "I learned something—don't play God. A lot of other people already knew that, but I have never doubted for a minute that a lot of other people are smarter than me, and figure things out quicker, and have grace and statistical norms on their side. Probably I went wrong by being too imaginative, although really I was guarding against that" (Barthelme, *Sixty Stories* 300).

He compares himself to God saying "God does a lot worse things, every day, in one little family, any family, than I did in that whole city" (Barthelme, *Sixty Stories* 300) and concludes "but He's got a better imagination than I do" (Barthelme, *Sixty Stories* 300). Therefore, in addition to the commentary on the

much-discussed role of an author, the complexity of the ideological power of institutionalization can be seen highlighted in Barthelme's narrator's experience of attempting to play God. As argued by Berger and Luckmann, power needs the success of "conceptual machinery," which is absent for the narrator of "I Bought a Little City." Even though he attempts to introduce a new reality to the city by force, he neglects the workings of processes of institutionalization and the ideological or conceptual dimension of social reality and thus, he cannot attain solidarity and sustained authority.

Conclusion

Our reading of Barthelme's "The Balloon" and "I Bought a Little City," with a focus on objectivation, institutionalization, and legitimation, proved consistent with the sociological concerns in the stories. In "The Balloon," the introduction of a new object or phenomenon that escapes interpretation by the citizens of New York can be seen disrupting the taken-for-granted institutionalized order and habitualized life. It can also highlight the processes of meaning-making and signification as well as how humans construct the reality they perceive as objectivated. As the balloon does not fit the citizens' definition of reality, it appears unreal and threatening to them. However, after much endeavor to understand or assign a meaning or purpose to it, it dawns on the public, as the narrator tells us, that change is always possible with all human-made systems.

In "I Bought a Little City," we explored the fundamentals of the processes of institutionalization and formation of reality through the discussions on "society as objective reality" in *TSCR*. The new owner of Galveston attempts to establish a new reality, through physically changing the structure of the town and instructing new rules, where the people already have an objectivated reality, which appears as the world to them. Another crucial sociological point linked with institutionalization in the story are the struggles of power associated with social control in this institutionalized world, which pinpoint how Barthelme's stories can be linked with Berger and Luckmann's notions of legitimation and "conceptual machinery" in "I Bought a Little City."

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NIJE OGRANIČENO NI DEFINIRANO, VEĆ KONSTRUIRANO I INTERNALIZIRANO: ISTRAŽIVANJE OBJEKTIVIZACIJE, INSTITUCIONALIZACIJE I LEGITIMIZACIJE U „BALONU“ I „KUPIO SAM MALI GRAD“ DONALDA BARTHELMEA

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Kratku prozu Donalda Barthelmea obilježava poletna koncentracija na svakodnevni život, konstrukcija značenja i pluralnost stvarnosti uz razigran, metafikcijski i fragmentarni stil. Iako plodno tlo za istraživanje sociopolitičkih pitanja, osobito u Americi sredinom i krajem 20. stoljeća, pregled radova o Barthelmeovim djelima naglašava prazninu u primjeni moguće relevantnih sociooloških i političkih teorija na Barthelmeove kratke priče. U skladu s tim, *Društvena konstrukcija stvarnosti* (1966) Petera L. Bergera i Thomasa Luckmanna mogla bi biti podudarna teorija s Barthelmeovim sociološkim interesima u njegovoj kratkoj prozi. U svojoj raspravi Berger i Luckmann vide stvarnost kao neku vrstu „kolektivne fikcije“ koja je konstruirana procesima institucionalizacije, socijalizacije i svakodnevne društvene interakcije, posebice kroz jezik. U ovom članku čitamo „Balon” i „Kupio sam mali grad”, koji su odabrani tematski, u svjetlu „društva kao objektivne stvarnosti“ kroz koncepte objektivacije, institucionalizacije i legitimizacije. Povezujući književnost i sociologiju, cilj nam je točno odrediti kako priče promatraju, razotkrivaju i potencijalno kritiziraju konstrukciju značenja i stvarno funkcioniranje procesa u društvenoj konstrukciji stvarnosti.

Ključne riječi: američka kratka priča, Donald Barthelme, društvena konstrukcija stvarnosti, institucionalizacija, objektivizacija, postmodernistička fikcija