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**DON JUAN: THE DISCOURSE OF SEDUCTION
AS AN EXERCISE OF POWER**

The figure of Don Juan that emerged in Spanish baroque synthesised several important cultural issues related to the phenomenon of seduction, a subject of great social controversy since the very beginning of the Christian era. The present article analyses one of the fundamental parts of the universal appeal of the Don Juan figure – the discourse of seduction, considering it from the social and cultural point of view. The traditional discussion of the subject focuses on the contents of the discourse whereas the present article emphasises the implications rather than the contents, grounding its arguments on Jean Baudrillard's theory of seduction, which claims that it is the signs and the play of signs that are important in seduction, not their meanings. The seduction discourse is seen as a means to exercise power on the women that Don Juan deals with as well as on the audience who gets involved into the discourse creation process. The article concludes with a claim that Don Juan is a figure of social domination, and his discourse is a means to achieve it.

KEY WORDS: *Don Juan, seduction, discourse, power.*

Introduction

Seduction as a phenomenon balancing on the border between the allowed and the forbidden within the Western Christian moral frame has been an issue of great social controversy since the very beginning of the Christian era. The figure of Don Juan that emerges at the prime of the Spanish baroque synthesised several important cultural concerns related to the subject; its topicality was reaffirmed by its popularity among all cultural and social layers in the majority of national European cultures. Don Juan has become the symbol of what he is best known for – seduction. The present article is analysing one of the most fundamental parts of the universal appeal of the Don Juan figure – the discourse of seduction, considering it from the social and cultural rather than from the linguistic or semantic point of view.

The discourse of seduction is addressed in one or another way in many works of contemporary literary criticism with feminist criticism prevailing (Jane Miller, Jenny Newman, Patricia Seed, etc.). The usual discussion focuses more often on the contents of

the discourse, i.e., *what* is being said with *what* words, and explaining their semantic and social implications. The present article deviates a little from the tradition, emphasising the implications rather than the contents of the discourse, grounding its arguments on Jean Baudrillard's theory of seduction which claims that it is the signs and the play of signs that is important in seduction, not their meanings.

A brief historical review

Seduction is driving someone into something evil, and it has always been associated with eroticism. *Se-ducere* in translation from Latin means to 'divert somebody from their own path'. The right path, meanwhile, especially in a Christian society, follows the code of the Church, leading the woman into marriage, and the man away from the sin of desiring something that belongs to another man (the woman, who may belong only to her father (brother, uncle), or the husband). The treatment of the sinner would mainly depend on their gender, the woman always being in a far less advantageous position.

In early Christianity the woman is seen as the temptress, her sexuality is 'unbridled', she is likened to an animal in her erotic desires. As an irrational creature, in whose person the soul and the body unite in erotic desire, making her boundlessly sensual, the woman is a power of extreme danger, threatening the rational social order as the object and reason that radiates eroticism (Mickūnas 2010: 48). The woman in the Middle Ages is the daughter of Eve who tempts the man and deprives him of Paradise, seducing him into disobedience and violation of the forbidden. As such, she must be either eliminated (as a witch, usually by burning), or be severely repressed into the strictest social framework that would be able to bridle her appetites, i.e. marriage (or convent, in the most severe cases). Later Christianity produces the idea of a 'tamed' woman, or a disembodied woman, i.e. the Madonna. She is virgin and distant, she is impossible to touch and desire, she is dressed and a purified image of the soul. She is unable to seduce, because the very idea of 'leading astray' is beyond any possible relation to her. The medieval concept of 'courtly love' is the secular version of the idea. Seduction thus becomes dissociated from the woman and gradually – with the Renaissance return to the bodily matters and the changing attitude to the female reasoning capacity – becomes a male prerogative. The figure of Don Juan emerges at the time of total moral decline – the age of the Baroque, where seduction is a male sport, practiced by everyone everywhere, throughout the whole social pattern of Europe. The woman, however, is in a far less advantageous position as she has much more to lose: her virginity equals the honour of her family and is a guarantee to a successful marriage (the only available version of social existence and occupation).

The 18th century reaches even lower depths of moral decay, producing the types like the rake and the sophisticated seducer, whose joy is to defeat the woman by defeating her will so that she herself would embrace the violation of the forbidden.

The 19th century seducer is seeking for the ideal woman, so the 'forbidden fruit' is a marginal value. Seduction is merely an instrument that serves a higher purpose of searching for the eternal love, thus its quality of 'leading astray' is not even questioned. It is still a male priority, for the woman still has more to lose: apart from her virginity

and social respect as well as the support of her family, she is the one who has to take all the blame for not being able to resist her own desires, thus confirming her irrationalism and dependence on men once more.

In the 20th century the ban on the forbidden is lifted, and seduction in relation to sexuality loses its quality of interdiction. In the age of equal rights seduction seems to be sported by both sexes without much sense of purpose or fulfilment.

This brief historical look at seduction does not reflect all the complexity of the phenomenon and its social implications. Yet it does demonstrate the social and even moral inequality between male and female members of society; the woman always remains in the position of a commodity, even if, with time, valued more for certain personal qualities.

The Don Juan legend is a narrative of seduction that works also as an exercise of social power and its demonstration. That is one of the reasons why the figure of Don Juan itself and versions of the legend that it has inspired are often criticised by feminist literary critics, who point out that the female voices are not being heard in the legend¹. At this point, however, it is important to note that Don Juan is a character of the male fancy, a male myth from a masculinist context; the feminist view of it would be not doing justice to the main subject of the myth, i.e. Don Juan himself.

Nevertheless, the feminist criticism points out several very important aspects of seduction that are essential for the perception of the change in the seduction concept in the 20th century.

Seduction as an exercise of power

Predominantly, feminism sees seduction as a central metaphor of male and female inequality in the Western culture. “Seduction [...] is my theme: as an analogy or metaphor, if you like, but also as a means of inserting sexual relations as an absolutely central term for any understanding of how power is experienced in societies based on inequality” (Miller 1990: 23). Jenny Newman places seduction somewhere between courtship and rape, claiming that seduction can never occur between equals: “The seducer tempts. The one who is seduced yields to temptation. For seduction to occur, one person must want sex more than the other – or else have less to lose by it” (Newman 1990: ix). In the Western culture it is most often the woman who should, or would, yield, for she, as it has been mentioned, has more to lose by the act of sex (ibid.: 22).

The feminist scholar Jane Miller makes another important observation about the process of seduction in the West. Due to the particularities of Western mentality and society, seduction, in Miller’s view, has been treated as crime because “female sexuality [has been perceived] as a valuable commodity worth a certain amount of money on the open market. It is a commodity owned by men and prized. The seducer of women disrupts the ordinary process of bargaining and exchange, intruding on the transaction by appealing to the woman herself and to her sexual nature” (ibid.: 35). Mažeikis explains the very emergence of Don Juan concept as the ‘seducer archetype’ in terms of social phenomenon, inherently caused

¹ See, for example, Haslett, M., 1997. *Byron’s Don Juan and the Don Juan Legend*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

by the social environment, i.e., the patriarchal society, in which the woman is not a free independent personality, but a performer of a certain function (always related to the family, as family is the single space in which the female existence is regarded as acceptable). As such, it is perceived as ‘commodity’, not a reasoning, self-conscious subject. She is an object of diplomacy and negotiation, not an object of desire². Don Juan’s appeal to the woman’s own desire and disregard of her social status destroys the very process of the commodity exchange in the patriarchal society, as the female use value is suddenly threatened by the exchange value that the Don Juan’s interest in the woman produces.

Thus, following the feminist viewpoint, seduction is a concept that relates to inequality between women and men, and a means for exercising power on women, as well as the intrinsic notion of (female) surrender, and the capitalist notion of female ‘exchange value’ in the patriarchal society.

Seduction in philosophical reflection

Seduction as a theme for philosophical reflection should be credited to the name of Kierkegaard. In his work *Either/Or* (1843) Kierkegaard distinguishes two ways of seduction: the immediate/erotic, and the spiritual/intellectual. He sees seduction as an act of attraction, when both the seducer and the seduced are seduced by their mutual attraction to each other (Slok 2015: 18). This means that desire becomes reciprocal, and the seductive act turns into a reciprocal giving between Don Juan and the woman who meets him. He awakens femininity in her, and she becomes aware of it and her female essence. Thus the meeting with Don Juan leaves the woman transformed spiritually, she is lifted into another sphere, and that is why she does not regret having met Don Juan; he “rather makes the girls happy, and in a strange way that is what they want” (Kierkegaard 1987: 101). Don Juan, like the Trickster god Hermes, leads the girls through the ontological threshold of maturity to womanhood.

The immediate/erotic type of seduction is embodied, according to Kierkegaard, by the character of Mozart’s Don Giovanni, as he is like music that disappears as fast as is played (Slok 2015: 18), his power is his spontaneity, not his words. He moves from one woman to another, enjoying not the woman, but the satisfaction of his desire; as soon as it is over, he seeks a new object, and so it goes on indefinitely.

The spiritual/intellectual seduction, according to Kierkegaard, is embodied in the character of Faust, who in *Either/ Or* is juxtaposed with Don Juan. Johannes the Seducer from “Diary of a Seducer” is Kierkegaard’s own version of the type. Both Johannes and Faust are incapable of immediacy. They are only capable of reflection and strategising, but they grow tired of always thinking and planning and never being present. Johannes and Faust lack the capacity to be just what they are and accept others as they are. They love in order to change the beloved (ibid.: 21). Faust, differently from Don Juan, cannot love in spite of differences; a (reflected) seduction for him is not a pleasure, but rather a distraction from himself and his other thoughts. Faust is the intellectual seducer; in contrast

² Prof. G. Mažeikis, individual consultation, 20 March 2015.

to Don Giovanni, Faust is unmusical. His weapon is first and foremost the word, which is also true of Kierkegaard's Johannes the Seducer.

Kierkegaard's work elevated the figure of Don Juan to the conceptual level of reflection for the first time in its history, and established the tradition to ground the discussion of Don Juan on Mozart's opera.

After Kierkegaard, the most important reflections on the concept of seduction come from the French postmodernist thinker Jean Baudrillard. In his book *Seduction* (1979) the process is seen as the fundamental organising principle of the 20th century culture: "Everything is seduction and nothing but seduction" (Baudrillard 1990: 83). Contrasting seduction with sex, Baudrillard distinguishes between two seductive modes – the feminine and the masculine. The female mode of seduction is artificial and symbolic, it involves flirtations, double entendres, sly looks, whispered promises, and continual putting off of the sexual act. It also involves the manipulations of signs such as makeup and fashion, and titillating gestures in order to achieve control over a symbolic order. The male seductive mode is centred on the phallus, which is direct and natural, seeking to master a real order – to complete the sexual act. The male seductive mode is driven by the desire for power – seduction, meanwhile, is "stronger than power because it is reversible and mortal, while power, like value, seeks to be irreversible, cumulative and immortal" (ibid.: 46). Seduction is also stronger than production because the latter is interested in something that is finite, i.e., the result, while seduction is interested in the process and the eternal postponing (of the result, i.e., the sexual act).

Importantly, Baudrillard also speaks of *the seduction of discourse*, which lies in its play with signs, not in a search for hidden meanings, "...the seduction of signs themselves being more important than the emergence of any hidden truth" (ibid.: 54). Interpretation that aims at finding the meanings beyond the signs of discourse is the opposite of seduction *par excellence*, and is "the least seductive of discourses" (ibid.). What renders a discourse seductive is "its very appearance, its inflections, its nuances, the circulation (whether aleatory and senseless, or ritualized and meticulous) of signs at its surface", but not its meaning, because a meaningful discourse seeks "to end appearances" which leads to its failure as a discourse" (ibid.).

The discourse of Don Juan – the seducer's monologue

One of the most important features of Don Juan is his inclination towards discourse, i.e. the need he feels to register and make known his 'conquests'. This is true of almost every prominent literary Don Juan as well as of some social don juans. The very first, Tirso's Don Juan, keeps a list of his victories, and is very concerned about becoming known as "the greatest trickster of all Spain". His reputation as a cheater of women is more important to him than the actual cheat. Molière's Dom Juan also keeps a catalogue of his conquests, yet his discursiveness concerns his own motifs and reasons of his behaviour rather than his amorous affairs. The 'conquest-list' aria, being one of the best in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, allows to presume that the list, as well as the reputation are of high importance to this musical seducer. The discursive quality of Don Juan's adventures reaches its peak in

Byron's epic, where every amorous affair is registered with great detail (circumstances of the narrative and discretion of the narrator permitting), and the ambiguity of relationship between the Don Juan character and the narrator adds to the idea of the need to make the conquest history a public knowledge by way of cataloguing.

There are several features of Don Juan's discourse characteristic to the discourse of any and every version of the Don Juan legend. First, it is meant for seduction; second, it is subjective; and finally, it is used as a means of exercising power. Before exploring these arguments, I would like to point out that the Don Juan's discourse³, as such, consists of two elements: Don Juan's language (that he uses for seduction), and his accounts of his seduction (his catalogue of seduced women (or memoirs) and, consequently, his reputation).

The form and contents of the first element – Don Juan's language used for seduction – is of little interest in terms of its seductive rhetoric. Most often, Don Juan would seek for a young, beautiful virgin girl by admiring her beauty, swearing eternal love and instant marriage right after she gives herself to him. In the majority of the dramatic versions of the narrative (e.g. Tirso's, Molière's, Mozart's) this part of the story is not important at all, the same like any particular young woman. Don Juan's rhetoric is the power that seduces his victims, overcoming their anxieties of taking the risk, yet the language used by Don Juan does not carry any symbolical or other message because, as Baudrillard would put it, it does not imply any hidden meanings, to say nothing about the play of signs. It is a product of the male seductive mode, which is quite straightforward, though it may be – and very often is – quite elegant and romantic.

Much more important is the second part of the Don Juan's discourse – the catalogue of his victories, or the list of the 'conquered' women, and his reputation. The catalogue may appear a quite strange habit, for in fact, a 'donjuanist' man (who Don Juan unquestionably is), in order to be successful, should seemingly try to hide his real 'fame', for women would not trust him if they knew he is a liar and cheater. Don Juan's inclination to discourse, i.e. the need to register and publicize his victories or even his whole life-story, is obvious in many literary versions of the Don Juan legend, as well as cases of 'social donjuanism'⁴ that provide some of the most interesting material on the subject.

It seems that many European rakes believed it to be an obligation to provide a written account of their dissolute lives: from the Earl of Rochester John Wilmott to Casanova, De Sade, Rousseau, etc. Of course, the style of life these men led determined a greater amount of interesting events and a greater variety of people met, yet the need to register all their amorous 'conquests' in detail (sometimes at the danger of being compromised, imprisoned, accused of lie and blackmail, and the like) seems quite particular and deserves special attention.

³ Not 'donjuanist' as the latter refers not to the Don Juan figure but to the donjuanist pattern of behaviour, falling under the label of psychosocial studies that is beyond the author's scope of investigation. The term 'donjuanist', used further in the article, indicates a psychosocial behavioural pattern.

⁴ The term refers to the psychosocial behavioural pattern, usually male, characterised by the interest in representatives of the opposite sex being limited only to sexual physical contact, frequent change of partners, avoiding stable relationship, etc., the focus of interest being not the partner, but the great number of partners, and their change.

One of the possible reasons of this sort of fame could be the pride in their virility and appetite, which, though publicly condemned as immoral, would secretly be admired or even envied. Another reason – obviously, in direct connection with the previous one – could be the ability to have the control over their own discourse, to provide their own version of events that would encourage the desired way of interpretation. For example, Giacomo Casanova claims that he had loved all women he met on his way, thus producing the impression of an emotional, tender man and lover, though both the contemporary and the current readers of his memoirs have to realise that the account is a personal interpretation of the legendary seducer that can by no means be considered objective.

Another objective truth that can be avoided only by strictly controlling one's own discourse is the answer to the question 'Is Don Juan a good lover?'. He is primarily interested in the quantity of amorous adventures, meanwhile the quality leaves quite a few doubts: Don Juan never speaks about the pleasure of passion or desire, but always about the pleasure of deceit. The main aim of the first, Tirso's Don Juan (and of quite a few of his later sequels) is achieving the fame of the "greatest trickster of Seville". He is perfectly aware of what the myth-making process involves: it is *story-telling* based on *imagination*. He creates the legend of his fame in the right manner, giving only his own account of seductions – and his is the only version to circulate, for the seduced ladies will never dare to speak out, fearing to disclose the fact of their lost honour. Thus the audience may only rely on their own imagination, for it is not known that Don Juan would give particular details of his seductions. Thus we know of Don Juan's affairs only as much as he himself chooses to tell us – and that is not a lot. In this way the audience, by having to imagine the part that has not been told, gets involved in the Don Juan's myth-making process.

That is how the Don Juan discourse becomes a way of exercising power on women as well as the audience in general. And the list of conquests, or the catalogue, gradually becomes yet another instrument of seduction – in later times, when the morals become less strict, and the social reputation of Don Juan improves. Then being on his list is no longer a shame, and it is considered a far better experience than not being there. Jane Miller explains this change in a very simple manner: "Women are seduced by more than the promise of sexual pleasure or escape from poverty, or even eternal devotion. They are seduced as well by stories men have told about those seductions and by the vision of women which may be derived from such stories" (Miller 1990: 2). Or, to paraphrase Baudrillard, what is irresistible about seduction is the feeling of being desired (Baudrillard 1990: 81). It is being seductive that seduces most – that is the most irresistible characteristics of seduction. A place in Don Juan's list is seductive and desirable because it means that the woman in question is an object of Don Juan's seduction, i.e. she is seductive, or *the* seductress.

Importantly, the discourse of Don Juan is always monologous – in the cases of registering the seduced victims by principle of catalogue, and especially in the cases of cataloguing the chronological process of seducing one victim. Seducers' diaries become popular in the 18th century; the versions worth mentioning are Choderlos de Laclos *Les liaisons dangereuses* and Søren Kierkegaard's *Diary of A Seducer*. In the latter seduction is

shown as a long and protracted process that aims not at a short-time bodily satisfaction but an absolute crushing of the girl's will, penetration into her soul and its total overpowering. When that is achieved, the seducer loses any interest in the girl, and the carnal passion is wholly unnecessary. Therefore, for Kierkegaard, Don Juan is an erotic, but not spiritual, seducer. As Baudrillard puts it, rushing from one bodily conquest to another Don Juan does not experience the 'spiritual', in Kierkegaard's terms, dimension of seduction, where the challenge pushes the woman's seductive resources and powers to their limit, so that, in accord with a carefully laid plan, they can be turned against themselves (Baudrillard 1990: 101).

As correctly indicated by Kierkegaard, that is not Don Juan's intention. Seduction for Don Juan is always spontaneous, passionate and carnal. That is why the donjuanist discourse is first of all a discourse of deceit, striving to impose its rules on those who encounter it, but not seeking to overmaster them. In the opinion of Baudrillard, it is impure, even vulgar seduction (ibid.). Seduction, according to Baudrillard, is not related to sexuality or body matters (ibid.: 10), power is related to them. The genuine seduction, feminine in its essence (equally as seduction is the essence of femininity) does not strive for a carnal result. "I do not want to love, cherish, or even please you, but to *seduce* you – and my only concern is not that you love or please me, but that you are *seduced*" (ibid.: 86). Masculine seduction aims at result, body, donjuanist catalogue of conquests, monologous demonstration of power. Genuine seduction, according to Baudrillard, "represents mastery over the symbolic universe, while power represents only mastery of the real universe" (ibid.: 8). Therefore Don Juan is a typical figure of the masculine seductive mode: the emphasis in his character is on the physical result of his seduction, i.e. deceiving the woman into the physical sexual contact, which is always a spontaneous and passionate act. The catalogue of conquests is of paramount importance for both the seduction process and the discourse of seduction (or Don Juan's discourse) and its dispersion.

Conclusion

Discourse is a means of domination for Don Juan – by controlling it and spreading his reputation he gains control over the women who are engaged into relationship with him. Don Juan dominates the women that he violates – according to the existing moral code, they cannot complain, for if they did, they would disclose the loss of their honour, and consequently, the honour of their family. Don Juan, however, does not take them by force, he is no rapist. They give in to him themselves, even if they have been tricked in one or another way into the intercourse. Further on, with the help of his discourse Don Juan gains domination over the audience as well – involving it into his legend creation process as the spectators or the readers have to imagine what has not been mentioned by the catalogue of ladies or Don Juan himself.

In fact, Don Juan seems to possess a good knowledge of public relations, and seems to be acting for the sake of becoming famous rather than for anything else. It is as if the very existence of his reputation of the greatest trickster of all Spain would render him more satisfaction – and power – than the real acts of seduction he has performed.

According to Foucault, discourse is created and perpetuated by those who have the power and means of communication (Foucault 1977). In the case of Don Juan, it works the other way round as well – creating and perpetuating one’s own discourse through an adequate means of communication accords power. For Foucault, it is through discourse (through knowledge) that we are created (ibid.). In the case of Don Juan, he is the only one who is able to create his own discourse: the women involved would not be willing to do it, for that would mean that they have had direct experience. In fact, there is no way to find out the truth: the women would not speak freely, even if they wanted to. Thus, Don Juan is the only one who creates and spreads his reputation of “the greatest trickster of all Spain”.

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