SHORTCIRCUITING DEATH:
THE ENDING OF *CHANGING PLACES* AND THE DEATH OF THE NOVEL

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Changing Places, considered as David Lodge's most innovative novel, expresses its author's interest in the processes which generate fictional form through a variety of metafictional techniques that operate on several levels.[1] The exaggerated imposition of pattern that Lodge undertakes appears to be an exercise of artifice, which draws attention to itself. The plot of *Changing Places* is conspicuously subordinated to artificial generative principles, a technique listed by Brian Stonehill (1988: 29-30) in his "repertoire of reflexivity" as one of the "family characteristics" of fictions that depict themselves. Everything in this "duplex chronicle" of academic exchange happens twice, and more often than not, at the same time. This symmetry and simultaneity—which Lodge takes to extremes—jeopardizes the verisimilitude of the novel. The reader is presented with too many of these coincidences, which work to deliberately disrupt his/her assumptions concerning the linear relationship between text and the world, characteristic of realistic fiction. The discursive strategy of juxtaposition—which presents simultaneous events successively in the spatial continuum of the text—further reinforces the absurd chronological symmetry, at the cost of interrupting the story line. The structural categories of time and space, instead of being

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inconspicuous and inert media in which events take place, are thus foregrounded and problematized by parodic overstatement. They cannot but advertise their conventionality, and that of all temporal and spatial designs in fiction. The strategies that fiction deploys are revealed not as "neutral" or "objective" but as a product of a series of conventions. "Ending," the last chapter of *Changing Places*, which unquestionably shows the pains David Lodge took in the structuring of the novel, proves especially interesting in this respect.

Endings particularly distinguish postmodernist fiction. The traditional closed ending—"in which mystery is explained and fortunes are settled" (Lodge 1989: 226), tying up all loose ends—and the modernist open ending—satisfying but not final—have given way to multiple endings, parody endings and non-endings. Even the modernist open ending seems now too comfortable in "its endorsement of the commonplace that life, somehow or another, goes on" (Lodge 1986b: 154), it still makes a claim for the fiction's realism. Postmodernist endings—which delight in disclosing their own conventionality—have in common an element of playfulness and even trickery, which sometimes takes the form of withholding information or cheating the reader (Alexander 1990: 3).

According to Steven C. Wiegenstein (1987: 246), in ending *Changing Places* David Lodge faces a quandary:

> The prospect of Morris and Philip returning to their respective homes, though seemingly demanded by the requirements of plot symmetry, is not a satisfactorily comic solution. Neither professor is entirely sure that he wants to return, and neither wife is entirely ready to accept him. The ending so often favoured by the academic comedy—flight—is likewise closed off; both couples have family and financial obligations from which they cannot and desire not to escape. . . . Shall the story end happily (and falsely) or unhappily (violating the comic structure that has been built in the preceding five chapters)?

As David Lodge observes of Hemingway's short story "Cat in the Rain," in *Changing Places* the story "tantalizingly stops just short of that point in the fabula where we should, with our readerly desire for certainty, wish it to" (1986b: 28). *Changing Places* refuses to impose organic, or any other kind of form on its comic spirit. The novel's problematic ending exposes and disrupts both comic circularity and narrative closure, rejecting in this way the comforts of stereotyped endings, of the familiar narrative form of beginning, middle and end (and only one of each) (Alexander 1990: 37).

"The further we inquire into the problems of ends"—states Peter Brooks—"the more it seems to compel a further inquiry into its relation to the human end" (1984: 95). In *Reading for the Plot* Brooks explains the narrative process as an enactment of man's time-boundedness, of his conscious existence within the limits of mortality (1984: xi). Accordingly, the dynamics of plot are structured as a movement from the beginning—linked to Eros, stimulation into tension and the desire of narrative—through a middle—experienced as a detour, an imposed delay—, and finally to an ending which is associated to the death-wish, quiescence and non-narratability (1984: 107). In fact, we read moved by our desire for the end, for that recognition which is the moment of the death of the reader in the text, and a substitute for our desire for death and dissolution. The narrative end is supposed, like the human end, to provide total knowledge, and thus, it grants us the possibility of knowing that which must remain unexplained in our lives. It is a surrogate, Walter Benjamin claims, for "the death that writes *finis* to the life and therefore confers on it its meaning" (in Brooks 1984: 22). Thus, unsatisfactory open endings frustrate our desire for the end, for absolute knowledge and longed-for integration. Postmodernist endings, by withholding information from the readers, deny them the possibility of giving meaning to their lives, and reveal the narrative end not as "the moment of absolute truth" but as a convention.

The structural parallels which rule *Changing Places* from the beginning, come together in "Ending" bringing about an "air miss" over Manhattan (*CP* 239). The four characters are flying to a meeting where they will decide who should live with whom. The possibility of the characters dying in a plane crash is the nearest thing in the novel to a fulfilment of the reader's death-wish, and also a parody of it. *Let's Write a Novel*, a compendium of conventional wisdom of the novel genre which Philip Swallow bought second-hand for six pence and which functions as a parodic internal metatext—in Gérard Genette's terminology (1982)—has already informed both characters and readers of the three possible ways of ending a novel: the best is, of course, the happy ending, the second best is the unhappy ending, and the worst—and one which you should never attempt unless you have Genius—is the non-ending (*CP* 88). It is a straight choice: either Lodge is flaunting his Genius or he is blatantly challenging the teachings of *Let's Write a Novel* (or both). The non-ending of *Changing Places* puts an end to the reading activity, but not to the reader's desire for the end, which spills over the text's boundaries, leaving the reader wondering about the future of the characters and also

about his/her own final dissolution. The novel rejects the conventional alternative to human experience that narrative is supposed to provide.

Frank Kermode—who in *The Sense of an Ending* argues that human beings need fictions to give meaning to their lives—uses the classical term *peripeteia* to signify the postponement of the expected end in the interest of reality. According to him, the more daring the *peripeteia*, the more we feel that the work respects our sense of reality (in Lodge 1986b: 150). Since humankind views life *in medias res*, it is "more real" for novels to reach their endings in unexpected rather than expected ways. Thus, the unexpected ending of *Changing Places* is nearer to reality in that it imitates the anarchic flux of experience. As Paddy Bostock puts it "Lodge can claim to be adding an extra layer of realism to what is already his preferred form" (1989: 68). Paradoxically, in its rejection of closure, this ending can also claim to be in tune with the most radical postmodernist practice. Bostock interprets it as "another instance of Lodge having it both ways at the same time, showing awareness of radical thought and yet finding a way to domesticate it in the traditions of native realism" (1989: 69). One can wonder, however, whether this is an instance of Lodge's tendency to compromise, or just another manifestation of the ambiguous relationship between postmodernism—especially in its British version—and realism.

In "Ending" we also come across a parodic allusion to the postmodernist practice of the multiple ending. "There are choices to be made"—states Morris—"We must be aware of all the possibilities" (*CP* 245). And the characters move on to discuss the possible ways out of their double adultery: they can divorce and remarry, divorce and not remarry, go back to their original partners, or as Morris puts forward, practice group marriage. The novel refuses to make a decision, and thus passes the responsibility on to the reader. Postmodernist multiple endings do nothing but foreground an implicit tendency in the novel: novels are about choosing. They are often centred around characters who must choose—most often sexual partners or financial objectives, and often both: "Novels hover over the freedom of choice—Emma with Knightly or Frank Church, Lydgate with Dorothea or Rosamond, Jude with Arabella or Sue, and so on" (Davies 1987: 219). However, Davies notes, this privileging of choice in the novel is paradoxical since the reader is the one who is least able to change anything about the plot. The responsible exercise of freedom demanded of the reader in postmodernist endings tries to contest this fact. But "openness" does not mean "indefiniteness," and what is in fact made available to the reader is "a range of rigidly preestablished and ordained interpretative solutions and these never allow the reader to move

outside the strict control of the author" (Eco 1989: 6). The possibilities offered by the multiple ending lead to an illusion of individual freedom which ultimately echoes and reinforces the functioning of the capitalist economy, for, in order for the capitalist system to work the individual must feel that he or she has "free choice" (Lee 1990: 58). The multiple ending of *Changing Places* both exemplifies and goes against the role accorded to the reader in Lodge's fiction. While it gives the reader the illusion of freedom of choice, it actually restricts the possibilities very severely. Lodge experiences a vague anxiety concerning postmodernist practices, but his view of textual modes is dependent on rhetorical figures which are consciously placed in the text by the author.

The vicissitudes of the characters in "Ending" are narrated in the form of a film-script. Or, is it a script for a TV drama? Or to put it in other words, does the reader associate it with the cinema or with the television? Lodge, in his criticism, refers to it as a film script; Philip's reflexive comments on the difference between endings in novels and films point in the same direction; the characters, however, are shown in the course of this chapter in the act of watching television. The sole allusion to this medium is not as banal as it may seem. Television is both more private and more readily accessible than the cinema. This last chapter of the novel is just one further stage in the narrator's "steady renegotiation of his position" (Bradbury in Morace 1989: 170) that has been going on throughout *Changing Places*. The narrator has made a final attempt at going unnoticed, but, ironically, its place has been filled in by an even more omnipresent and omniscient medium:

> En los catecismos escolares de otras épocas, de las épocas en que había catecismos, se trataba de describir la realidad inefable de Dios de una manera parecida a esta: *Dios es invisible, todopoderoso, está en todas partes, lo sabe todo y está siempre con nosotros.* Algo parecido se podría decir hoy de los contenidos de la televisión, de su omnipresencia y su omnisciencia. . . . La gente del común se ha acostumbrado a citar la televisión como una fuente segura de conocimiento y experiencia. *Ha salido en la tele* es un argumento de autoridad tan contundente como *lo vi con mis propios ojos*. La pantalla doméstica nos permite ser testigos vicarios de mil acontecimientos universales (de Miguel 1983: 42).

The script technique suggests an illusion of visual representation, and vision is habitually equated with access to truth. The technique, however, is not at all unobtrusive. Watching a film seems to require no effort at all, but

reading the script directions of "Ending," which are ultimately meant not to be read but seen, proves rather tedious. The film-script may not appear more "real" to a reader accustomed to the usual conventions novels employ for creating the illusion of realism. Besides, this new story-telling technique is also laid bare by Hilary's metafictional commentary: "You sound like a pair of scriptwriters discussing how to wind up a play" (*CP* 245).

Lodge states that in developing the highly symmetrical and perhaps predictable plot for *Changing Places*', he felt the need to provide some variety and surprise on another level of the text, and accordingly wrote each chapter in a different style (Lodge 1992: 227). The reasons why he ended the novel in the form of a film-script, he affirms, are mainly two: the most striking variation in narrative technique should come at the end, and, principally, he did not want to take sides in the matrimonial debate:

> I found myself unwilling to resolve the wife-swapping plot, partly because that would mean also resolving the cultural plot. . . . I did not want to have to decide, as implied author, in favour of this partnership or that (Lodge 1992: 128).

> I did not want to write from just one point of view or even two, but from four. . . . [B]y using a sort of dramatic form, just the dialogue, the reader stays outside the characters, there is a kind of distance, so they all have an equal status (in Díaz Bild 1990: 275).

The very last scene of the novel features the four characters at the hotel, after a morning shopping in Manhattan. Philip and Morris have now completely dropped the subject of their marital problems and the conversation turns to literary matters. Hilary, the voice of commonsense in the chapter, complains: "This is all very fascinating, I'm sure, but could we discuss something a little more practical? Like what the four of us are going to do in the immediate future?" "It's no use, Hilary. Don't you recognize the sound of men talking?" (*CP* 250), says Désirée, conscious that they have been relegated to the position of silent spectators. This position is assumed and confirmed by the script directions:

> HILARY and DESIREE begin to listen to what PHILIP is saying, and he becomes the focal point of attention (*CP* 251).

Lodge's attempt to offer equal status to all four characters is thus revealed as ineffective at this point. The ending of *Changing Places* leaves the female

characters no place from which to speak, or nothing to say. Hilary and Désirée are subordinated to the male discourse, equated throughout the novel to the discourse of literary criticism.

As teachers of English Literature, Morris and Philip are often given to expressing their own literary-theoretical views and to discussing all kinds of literary issues throughout the novel. This self-conscious theorizing about literature—usual in metafictional works—serves, in *Changing Places*, a double function: it is at the same time a naturalized constituent of the diegesis of the book—of the fictional world—and also a statement on the creation of such a world. Both Swallow and Zapp show a special interest in Jane Austen—Morris has published four "fiendishly clever" books on her, and Philip, a more modest researcher, chose her as the subject of his M. A. thesis. On the last page of *Changing Places* Philip brings up a passage from *Northanger Abbey* to illustrate the reader's experience of the ending of a novel:

> PHILIP: . . . You remember that passage in *Northanger Abbey* where Jane Austen says she's afraid that her readers will have guessed that a happy ending is coming up at any moment.
> MORRIS: (*nods*) Quote, 'Seeing in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity.' Unquote.
> PHILIP: That's it. Well, that's something the novelist can't help giving away, isn't it, that his book is shortly coming to an end? It may not be a happy ending, nowadays, but he can't disguise the tell-tale compression of the pages. (*CP* 251)

The intertextual relationship between *Changing Places* and Jane Austen is very significant at this stage of the novel, and it signifies on various levels. *Northanger Abbey* (1818) is mentioned by Patricia Waugh as an example of the implicit tendency of the novel throughout its history to draw attention to its linguistic construction (1990: 67-68), a tendency that *Changing Places* continues in a much more explicit way. Thus, David Lodge seems to present his own experimentalism not as a break with or reaction against "the great tradition of realistic fiction" (*CP* 250), but as an extension of it. For David Lodge, Austen was "perhaps the first novelist to master the judicious blend of authorial omniscience and limited view-point, sliding subtly between direct narrative and free indirect speech, that permits the novelist to command the simultaneous double perspective of public and private experience" (Lodge 1989: 39). The issue of the private and the public is central to *Changing Places*, which by and large privileges the former over the latter. In the novel,

Jane Austen is brought up by Philip Swallow not so much to express "the blending of public and private experience, inner and outer history" (Lodge 1989: 47), but to advocate the "old liberal doctrine of the inviolate self"—"what novels are all about" (*CP*250)—to which the protagonists suscribe. Reference to Austen's novels also brings to the fore the issue of the position of women in society, and works to both destabilize and install Lodge's male world. As Docherty notes, "Jane Austen's novels, while certainly granting a huge central importance to individual women characters as the main centre of attention and interest, simply operate to legitimize the bourgeois marriage and family which marginalized women in the first place" (Docherty 1991: 173). As a rule, her novels epitomize the endings of nineteenth-century novels in which the union of hero and heroine is an assurance of the possibility of a happy life extended in time and lived out in a world of meaningful social relationships (Lodge 1989: 181). Her novels are based on the social convention that marriage is a happy event, something to be desired. However, as Nicholas Mosley (1992: 5-6) states, there is little in them to suggest that life after marriage is happy. But the convention was strong enough to make the optimism seem convincing. This "perfect felicity"—as Philip Swallow notes and the ending of *Changing Places* confirms—is unavailable to contemporary novelists, who no longer share her experience of a common phenomenal world. The institution of marriage is also questioned both in *Changing Places* and in our contemporary world. Realizing that Jane Austen's happy endings are a thing of the past for them, Philip Swallow[2] connects their private troubles with a shift in aesthetic principles: "Well, the novel is dying and us with it" (*CP* 250), he despairs. The realistic novel, with its emphasis on private life, on the individual, is unable to account for the historic awareness of the new generation: "No wonder I could never get anything out of my novel-writing class at Euphoric State. It's an unnatural medium for their experience. Those kids (*gestures at screen*) are living a film, not a novel (*CP* 250)." And things begin to look more like a self-conscious parody when Philip brings up the question of ending on the last page. The novel ends with Philip Swallow's comparison of the different ways in which novels and films end:

> I mean, mentally you brace yourself for the ending of a novel. As you're reading, you are aware of the fact that there's only a page or two left in the book, and you get ready to close it. But with a film there is no way of telling, especially nowadays, when films are much more loosely structured, much more ambivalent, than they used to be.

> There is no way of telling which frame is going to be the last. The film is going along, just as life goes along, people are behaving, doing things, drinking, talking, and we're watching them, and at any point the director chooses, without warning, without anything being resolved, or explained, or wound up, it can just... end.
>
> PHILIP shrugs. The camera stops, freezing him in mid-gesture.
>
> THE END

Changing Places' ending is defined by Lodge as a "short circuit," a device characteristic of postmodernist fiction. The short circuit—which reveals the gap between the text and the world in order to administer a shock to the reader and resist assimilation into conventional literary categories—is often achieved by exposing literary conventions in the act of using them. The ending of *Changing Places* both installs and subverts the teleology, closure and causality of narrative, and effects this by means of contradiction, which articulates "irreconciliable desires and assertions" (Lodge 1977: 10). This contradiction is obvious when on the final page of the novel, after the camera freezes Philip in mid-gesture, we find an absurdly conventional and definite THE END obligingly inscribed in capital letters. Thus, *Changing Places* echoes the postmodernist urge to foreground the paradox of the desire for and the suspicion of narrative mastery (Hutcheon 1989: 64), showing that although we cannot do without plots we can at least show up their arbitrariness. "For me, and I think for other British novelists"—states Lodge—"metafiction has been particularly useful as a way of continuing to exploit the resources of realism while acknowledging their conventionality" (Lodge 1990: 43).

To contradict Philip Swallow's statement, the novel ends like a film, leaving us "without anything being resolved, or explained or wound up," (179) Philip frozen in a "concluding *tableau vivant*" a feature which, "as popularized by Truffaut's *400 Blows* (1959), has become a popular way for modern films to suggest open endings" (Deleyto 1992: 179). The author refuses to arbitrate between the characters and leaves us with them in mid-conversation, their futures and fortunes uncertain: "By having Philip draw attention to the fact that films are more amenable to unresolved endings than novels, while being represented as a character in a film inside a novel, I thought I had found a way to justify, by a kind of metafictional joke, my own refusal to resolve the story in *Changing Places*" (Lodge 1992: 227). So, apparently it is not only films that are much more ambivalent than they used to be. In the ending of *Changing Places* Lodge is also poking fun at the theories of Robert

Scholes, according to whom the camera has rendered literary realism redundant. The novel is "dying"—Scholes argues—and writers are now turning to "fabulations," to nonrealistic literary modes. The view that cinema has pushed the novel to self-reflexivity—a feature which is not uncommon among theorists of modern fiction (see Brian Stonehill 1988)—implies a naïve realistic theory of cinema, and also a restricted concept of realism. In fact, metafiction is present in the cinema from the beginning of its history. Traditionally film is held to give a powerful illusion of reality, but, we know through the studies initiated by Christian Metz and others, that cinema can never be directly "spoken" (Brunette and Willis 1989: 61). In the words, paradoxically, of Robert Scholes (1980: 199), "the more people understand the media, the more conscious they are of mediation." The belief that the cinema appeared as a challenge to realistic narrative is rejected by David Lodge. Although in "The Novelist at the Crossroads" (1986a: 17) he acknowledges that the contemporary cinema exhibits as wide a spectrum of styles as the contemporary novel, Lodge is not so much advocating a more sophisticated theory of the cinema[3] as writing off the "obsequies over the future of realistic fiction": "I am not convinced . . . that the camera is, in human hands, any more neutral than language, or that it renders literary realism redundant" (Lodge 1986a: 17). The fact that Lodge presents "Ending" in the form of a film-script is no capitulation on his part to Scholes'—and Swallow's—belief that the cinema is superior to realistic fiction when it comes to representing contemporary reality. In the words of Dennis Jackson "Lodge invokes the visual medium (television as well as film) mainly in order to reinforce a verbal communication—a novel, obviously, and one which sensitively enough registers the many discords of contemporary experience, and does so without stretching too far beyond the parametres of a realistic vision of life" (Jackson 478). Lodge's experimentalism in *Changing Places* can be interpreted as a set of rhetorical strategies which allow him both to partake of the appeal of innovation and to go on affirming his "faith in the future of realistic fiction."a

NOTES

1. For a comprehensive exposition of the metafictional techniques employed in *Changing Places* see the articles by Fernando Galván (1988) and Pilar Hidalgo (1984).

2. Philip, who at the beginning of the novel subscribes to the naïve theory of realism which Zapp despises, has evolved towards a more progressive view of literary texts. This evolution is due to his contact with the controversial Karl Kroop, the most radical literary critic of both academias. Kroop, who is giving a course on *The Death of the Book? Communication and Crisis in Contemporary Culture*, is described as quite an anticlimactic figure: "He was a short, bespectacled man with thinning hair—a disappointingly unheroic figure" (*CP* 183). His capacity as a literary critic is also called into question by Morris at the end of the novel: "It's a very crude kind of historicism he's peddling, surely? And bad aesthetics"(*CP* 250). One wonders whether David Lodge is thus disqualifying radical instances of literary criticism.

3. In fact, in later instances of his criticism, Lodge seems to contradict himself and affirm with Swallow and Scholes that film can imitate reality more faithfully: "Writing cannot imitate reality directly (*as film, for instance, can*)" (Lodge 1989:25) [my emphasis].

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