Leisure and Posthumanism in Houellebecq's Platform and Lanzarote

Nurit Buchweitz  
Beit Berl College

Elie Cohen-Gewerc  
Beit Berl College

Follow this and additional works at: http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb

Part of the American Studies Commons, Comparative Literature Commons, Education Commons, European Languages and Societies Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Other Arts and Humanities Commons, Other Film and Media Studies Commons, Reading and Language Commons, Rhetoric and Composition Commons, Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons, Television Commons, and the Theatre and Performance Studies Commons

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, Purdue University Press selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Recommended Citation


This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the CC BY-NC-ND license.
Abstract: In their article "Leisure and Posthumanism in Houellebecq's Platform and Lanzarote" Nurit Buchweitz and Elie Cohen-Gewerc analyze Michel Houellebecq's novels in the context of leisure studies. They posit that in particular in Platform and Lanzarote Houellebecq explores leisure practices available in industrial societies marked by consumer culture. Further, Buchweitz and Cohen-Gewerc argue that the abundant depictions of leisure in Houellebecq's texts is not unintentional because he introduces the concept of the posthuman condition and rethinks agency and human selfhood as a consequence of the collapse of subjectivity. Employing postmodern indeterminacy, Houellebecq explores contemporary mores and debates the extinction of the individual "I" and its substitution by an empty being whose essence is cast into doubt owing the irreconcilable co-existence of capitalism and technology.
Leisure and Posthumanism in Houellebecq’s Platform and Lanzarote

Leisure is an activity that defines industrial societies where “experience has become its own justification” (Brinkman 92), focusing more and more on individualism free from obligation. In humanist anthropocentric conception leisure is the first means in raising an individual’s awareness of himself/herself in realizing selfhood disconnected from social and institutional obligations. Alongside the tendency to perceive leisure as time for enjoyment, a break in routine, and escapism leisure can also be a “second chance” for the individual to encounter himself/herself as a person beyond the variety of functions he/she fulfills. Indeed, abilities and tendencies not required for social functioning may remain unnoticed until they appear when discovered when the subject is available for its own self-awareness. In the posthuman world, paradoxically, it seems that the more technology leaves humankind with more free time on its hands, the more it uses those same means in order to surround the subject with virtual structures which supervise and control him/her (see, e.g., Deleuze and Guattari 454-61). Thus, the meaning of the term “posthumanism” designates the waning of humanism and refers to the “end of man” resulting from the disappearance of the modern metanarratives of the Enlightenment and human emancipation (Herbrt 78). Posthumanism is perceived as the destabilization and debasement of the idea of the human as the center of the universe, individuality, and selfhood (see Hall 78-131). The depiction of leisure in Houellebecq’s oeuvre is not unintentional for he introduces a discussion on the posthuman: he rethinks agency and human selfhood as a consequence of the crisis and collapse of the subject owing to the co-existence and co-evolution of capitalism and technology. Houellebecq explores contemporary mores and debates the profusion of the individualist “I” and its substitution by an empty being whose internal essence is cast into doubt and he goes as far as to introduce a new human race in The Elementary Particles and in The Possibility of an Island controlled by technology. Among the range of leisure activities in Houellebecq’s texts there are descriptions of organized package tours and tour guides and these are located as heterotopias (see Foucault 7; McCann 132-71) as he inspects the dynamics of organized groups in their internal and external interactions. Further, Houellebecq describes mechanisms of the business of the holiday package. If leisure is a part of practices in culture in general and reflects its prevailing norms, Houellebecq is a partner to the hegemony of capitalist consumer society and its failures. In Lanzarote the protagonist enters a travel agency and while waiting for a sales assistant, he collects a bunch of leaflets on display:

The promised holiday embodies the dream leisure of the Western tourist in as much as consumption takes on an aesthetic dimension, a consumer fantasy as represented in popular culture and that catalogs and constructs behavior (see Bauman, “Pilgrim” 30; Jameson, Signatures 5). The proposed holiday site
on the island of Lanzarote, as all other options, is an isolated, artificial, controlled, closed, and secure area within a territory in which all outside of it are alien to it. All the desires of the holiday-taker come to immediate fruition and if the holidaymaker is in a "Third World" country, sexual desires of the Western consumer are also fulfilled as Houellebecq describes in Platform about sex tourism in Thailand and Cuba. The holiday is in fact a de-localization of pleasure (see Granger Remy, "Le Tourisme" 281; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are by Buchweitz and Cohen-Gewerc) to a place more easily accessible and less expensive: "You several hundred million westerners who have everything they could want but no longer manage to obtain sexual satisfaction ... on the other hand, you have several billion people who have nothing left to sell except their bodies and their unspoiled sexuality can simple, really simple to understand: it's an ideal trading opportunity" (Platform 173; on sexuality in Houellebecq's novels, see, e.g., Holzer).

Contrary to the suggestion of the marketing of the holiday and the perception of the vacationer, by a kind of functional omniscience able to monitor all activity at all times there is no free time and no free space for both are framed and constructed by an organizing system and if there are excursions outside the enclosed holiday compound, they are often aimed at enabling a glimpse into the lives of the Other in a voyeuristic manner (see Freire-Medeiros). The vacationer in such an artificial space is disconnected from obligations to others and is motivated by the desire to realize his/her fantasies away from the concrete realities of daily life and hence such leisure resembles only remotely the framework and practice of leisure (see Stebbins). Elie Cohen-Gewerc and Robert A. Stebbins posit that there are three main forms of leisure -- serious, casual, and project-based -- and argue that each may provide a space in which "the individual may develop a positive identity within it" (201). The type of leisure proposed by the brochure described by Houellebecq would be categorized as casual leisure activity, one which is "immediately, intrinsically rewarding, a relatively short-lived pleasurable activity, requiring little or no special training to enjoy it. Casual leisure is essentially hedonic" (Cohen-Gewerc and Stebbins 206). Certainly, this type of leisure constitutes a space that features a constructed environment in which physical needs are satisfied by means of sensationalism inherent in realizing a fantasy. Hence the economy of excess facilitated by the sales agent is perceived by the narrator as a happiness-enhancing potency, which goes to show the entangled connections between posthumanism and the society and its meta-value of "happy life" (Bauman, Does Ethics 167). Nevertheless, what is lacking in such leisure is the recruitment of internal resources, the excitement in broadening and remapping subjectivity. Such an experience cannot realize the concept of leisure as a personal agenda determined by each individual for himself/herself, for it is not one possessing content, meaning, and distinctive enrichment. Here, leisure is merely a distraction and a disconnection from the "I" so that ultimately "even if formally leisure was designed as an alternative, and even festive, institution, acting to effect the personal liberation of the individual, it has become over time a standard capitalist product subject to financial and emotional manipulation; one more product in the market of human imports" (Gurevitch and Arav 964).

Giorgio Agamben contends in What is an Apparatus? that modern apparatuses reveal the difference from traditional ones which were separate from the subject and established him/her as such and following Michel Foucault's understanding of the apparatus as a set of practices and mechanisms developed by society, Agamben maintains that the event that created the human was that of a schism between being and action, ontology and praxis. The human is the being, the apparatus is the action: "The term 'apparatus' designates that in which, and through which, one realizes a pure activity of governance devoid of any foundation in being. This is the reason why apparatuses must always imply a process of subjectification, that is to say, they must produce their subject" (Agamben 11). Every living being aspiring to organize and modify a predictable life is required to determine rules and establish mechanisms of control which will regulate for individual choice and thus, whether one does in one way or another, is to confine, direct, determine, intercept, shape, supervise and secure the deeds, the behaviors, the opinions and the statements of living beings" (31). The significance of the apparatus lies in the process of humanization, of the constitution of the subject given to management and control, but simultaneously separate from it and free. Nevertheless, Agamben points out that "what defines the apparatuses that we have to deal with in the current phase of capitalism is that they no longer act as much through the production of a subject, as through the process of what can be called desubjectification" (Agamben 20). In contemporary reality there is no longer a possibility of separating or distinguishing between human and machine. Today apparatuses allow us to crave them and to be controlled by them, but they do not create subjectivity and hence the decline of essential identities and the rise of the economy and consumerism as rulers, as pure acts of management. Agamben claims that in our days "there is not even a single instant in which the life of individuals is not modelled, contaminated, or controlled by some apparatuses" (15).

Perfecting apparatuses via technology has led to the fact that the expanse of free time in which the subject supposedly is solely left at his/her own disposal, cannot avoid operational disposition. Once the posthuman is left to his/her own devices, he/she submits himself/herself all the more to the mechanisms of temptation and seduction resulting in a misrepresentation of happiness: "at the root of each apparatus lies an-all-too-human demand for happiness" (Agamben 17). Thus, the process of de-subjectivation is linked with original leisure was that it unveils the invisible and the inevitable impact of an apparatus that technocultural logic has on the degree of agency ascribed to the individual. The leisure industry is such an apparatus managing the individual: the tour operator presents a developed and elaborate apparatus, a modular-technical system that offers an "answer" to every "need," supply to every demand suited to every personal whim with only ignorance and lack of self-awareness remaining. The posthumanist reality that has given birth to the leisure industry allows leisure to fulfil a social function: "The minute they have a couple of days of freedom, the inhabitants of Western Europe dash off to the other side of the world, they go halfway around the world in planes, they behave --literally -- like escaped convicts. I
couldn't blame them, since I was preparing to do just that" (Platform 20). The leisure industry apparatus does not permit subjectivization; rather, it is the posthuman human who, when given the task of facing himself/herself in the mirror of time, finds himself/herself in the mirror of time, finds himself/herself burned down by being essential components in recharging one's batteries, this is not the true, deep significance of leisure and because leisure (not finding free time, but a state of mind) in its purest form is based on freedom of consciousness, cognition, and internal strength, it is alien to the modular functionality of the leisure industry that is based on the standardization of the human and on the pretense of considering in advance the entire range of possibilities of human desire: "My dreams are run-of-the-mill. Like all of the inhabitants of Western Europe, I want to travel to more bluntly, what I really want, basically, is to be a tourist. We dream what dreams we can afford, and my dream is to go on an endless series of 'Romantic Getaways,' 'Colorful Expeditions,' and 'Pleasures à la carte' -- to use the titles of the three Nouvelles Frontières brochures" (Platform 20).

In Platform and Lanzarote, the narrator does not omit any tag or mark of the holiday marketing material. In Platform Houellebecq quotes directly from the catalog including the method of serial numbering and registration. By means of the quote, or the rhetorical language of the quote, Houellebecq emphasizes the commercial aspect of leisure, its conversion to a consumer product, cataloged and indexed, packaged and marketed. The holiday becomes a consumer product like any other, based on maximum expectation according to formulas and fixed models (see Delorme; Granger Remy, "Le Tourisme") meaning that leisure becomes a consumer need requiring a "finished product": "I hesitated quite a bit between 'Rum and Salsa' (ref: CUB CO 033, 16 days/14 nights, 11,250 francs for a double, singles and additional 1,350 francs) and 'Thai Tropic' (ref: THA CA 006, 15 days/13 nights, 9,950 francs for a double, singles an additional 1,175 francs). Actually, I was more attracted by Thailand ... have to admit that the copy in the brochure was very well done, sure to tempt the average browser: A package tour with a dash of adventure that will take you from the bamboo forests of the River Kwai to the island of Ko Samui, winding up, after crossing the spectacular Isthmus of Kra, at Ko Phi Phi, off the coast of Phuket. A cool trip to the tropics" (Platform 20-12).

On the one hand, the catalogs are aimed at individual freedom in that they depict a maximum degree of freedom as choice. On the other hand, the almost infinite number of possibilities leads to an actual weakening of choice to the extent of losing all ability to do so. The multiplicity of prearranged, ready-packaged options reveals subjectivity controlled by the many agents of consumer society that nurtures the hedonistic, dominant, and greedy "I." Thus, the leisure apparatus presents it in a showroom accompanied by brochures and sales talk turning its product into an object of desire. Not only is everything for this holiday prearranged and anticipated, but also a matter of déjà-vu in the brochure (see Delorme 299). All that remains is to realize the great promised adventure, which of course will never happen: "While consumer society rests its case on the promise to gratify human desires like no other society in the past could or dream of doing, the promise of satisfaction remains seductive only so long as the desire stays ungratified" (Baumann, Ethics 169). It is the consumer society that preserves the situation in which the consumer will never be completely satisfied, since "Consumer society thrives so long as it manages to render dissatisfaction (and so, in its own terms, unhappiness) permanent" (Baumann, Ethics 170).

When arriving at the touristic site itself, "leisure" is experienced via the mediation of the apparatus": in Platform the narrator arrives at Surat Thani and rather than gaining an impression, he reads the guidebook in order to know what to be impressed about and whether there is indeed anything impressive. In this case "Surat Thani -- population 42,000 -- is distinguished, according to the guide book, by the fact that it is of no interest whatever" (60). As Julie Delorme posits, this is precisely the simulacrum or substitute for reality: the preference for the image (lacking) in this case, over that of reality (299). Furthermore, even if the cynical, sophisti-ated consumer is both self-aware and consummately aware of the marketing strategies with which the catalog manipulates him by means of words emotively claiming "adventure," "wonderful," "cool," he is indifferent to them and is unable to pass beyond the possibilities of this awareness. The society in which Houellebecq's protagonist lives is one in which people are constantly observed, measured, and monitored generally for economic needs as fuel for the genuine flywheels of the consumer-targeted economy (see Bauman, Ethics 170) in order to create new needs that the subjects cannot live without. This occurs because the posthumanist state is one in which despite the apparent immense freedom to choose one's lifestyle and leisure, the subject in actuality devotes himself/herself to apparatuses and applications which pretend to know better than he/she does what he/she really wants, even before he/she knows it. Which is why Houellebecq quotes verbataim from the catalogs, for the main experience is that of the image of leisure, the catalog itself, and not the real holiday.

In Platform and Lanzarote the protagonists analyze constantly their decisions with reference to the state-of-the-art leisure apparatus and large segments of the texts are comprised of citations from advertising brochures. For example, note Michel's analysis of holiday brochures in Platform he supports by adding a survey of scientific accounts which explain the marketing process:

I spent the last day of my grace period in various travel agencies. I liked holiday brochures, their abstraction, the way of condensing the places of the world into a limited sequence of possible pleasures and fares. I was particularly fond of the star-ranking system, which indicated the intensity of the pleasure one was entitled to hope for. I wasn't happy, but I valued happiness and continued to aspire to it. According to the Marshal model, the buyer is a rational individual seeking to maximize his satisfaction while taking price into consideration; Veblen's model, on the other hand, analyzes the effect of pressure on the buying decision (depending on whether the buyer believes he can be identified with a defined group or to set himself apart from it). Copeland demonstrates that the buying process varies, depending on the category of product/service (impulse purchase, considered purchase, specialized purchase); but the Baudrillard and Becker model posits that a purchase necessarily implies a series of signals. Overall, I felt myself closer the Marshal model. (11)
"Being a tourist" or assuming the "role of a tourist" as expressed by Houellebecq in many reprises in his novels stands in contrast to traveling itself and means consuming some type of service package. One way to look into this paradox is to consider the overwhelming impact that mass tourism turns from being a "lack of desire", to the desire to choose, in an attempt to provide in a mirror resource at his/hers disposal and obligating personal responsibility. The leisure industry rev supported by the word horizon, the leisure industry, itself however is the product of the society that engendered this need. The vast choice provided by the catalogs blurs free will and releases the subject from responsibility. Elsewhere Houellebecq describes the place of the individual in industrial societies controlled by the logic of consumption: "Supermarket: "Supermarket man is organically unable to be a man of one desire, of one passion. This is the source of a certain suppression of the will existing among modern man; people do not desire less; quite the opposite, they desire increasingly more; but in their desires there is something scream- ing, shrieking: without any symbols of pure simulacra, human beings are in the main a product of external definitions, one might say advertisements in the broad use of the term. There is nothing about them that reminds one of that same total organic force stubbornly directed at its realisation, signified by the word "will." Thus, everyone is revealed as lacking a certain personality" (Rester Vivant 49).

Ostensibly, the supermarket, a "shrine" to consumer culture, is a temple of freedom. After all, no one except the buyer places anything in his/her shopping cart. Free to wander among the shelves, touch, examine, evaluate, and select the consumer can even leave without buying anything. Nonetheless, how often have we been witness to the surprise when the seemingly "free" buyer suddenly faces the size of his overloaded shopping cart, as if fallen victim to a painful fate? The more a person feels "free" and thus obligated to manage his life, so too does he appear more vulnerable, fragile and in need of external definitions, one might say advertisements in the broad use of the term. There is nothing about them that reminds one of that same total organic force stubbornly directed at its realisation, signified by the word "will." Thus, everyone is revealed as lacking a certain personality" (Rester Vivant 49).
sophisticated apparatuses. The posthuman is unable to relate to leisure as a space in which to implement freedom and continues to constitute data in their network that the apparatuses weave. Against this leisure/tourist industry, a symptomatic practice of the posthuman era that strips the concept and practice of leisure of its meaning, there is another pertinent description in Juremir Machado da Silva's *En Patagonie avec Michel Houellebecq*. The book features conversations Houellebecq holds with his translator into Patagonese: the two men set off together to an unfamiliar space where they find themselves holding soul-searching conversations. In one of these conversations they talk about trips to Europe they had taken in their youth with the Alliance Voyages travel agency: "Michel, those who wandered from place to place with the Alliance Voyages buses were more preoccupied with the sporty bus than those buses ... Yes, we could meet so many people. Today it sometimes seems to me that travelling is the best way not to have to talk to people. On a well-organized tour, between the two of us, you don’t meet people, other than waiters, taxi drivers, I lamented ... To travel today is a myth of the tourist industry. A person buys a package and thinks that he will find adventure, happiness and novelty every-

In conclusion, through describing leisure and the leisure/tourist industry in consumer society, Houellebecq expresses his thinking on the posthuman as challenging the potential for self-knowledge and empowerment and the collapse of individuality owing to enslavement by machines that the full force of apparatuses exerts on human happiness. Leisure is inherently an option, a possibility, and an opportunity and the question Houellebecq raises is whether the posthuman condition is able to grasp and practice its full potential. The picture Houellebecq depicts is of a void invaded by apparatuses, but a void also created by the apparatus: via leisure, the posthuman is understood as an evacuation of essential selfhood and personality and prevents individuals in consumer society from assuming responsibility for their own will and conduct. Houellebecq suggests that posthumanism constitutes an attack on freedom and free will.

**Works Cited**


Gurevitch, David (עמוס הירש), and Dan Arav (דנע אראל), eds. *מדיה והתרבות (Media and Culture)*. Tel-Aviv: Babel, 2012.


Authors's profile: Nurit Buchweitz teaches comparative literature at Beit Berl College. Her interests in scholarship include literary theory, postmodern literature, late-modernist poetry, and twenty-first century narratives. In addition to numerous articles, Buchweitz’s recent book publications include *An Officer of Civilization: The Poetics of Michel*
Houellebecq (2015) and the edited volume Sensational Pleasures in Cinema, Literature and Visual Arts (with Gilad Padva, 2014). E-mail: <nuritb@beitberl.ac.il>

Authors's profile: Elie Cohen-Gewerc philosophy at Beit Berl College. His interests in scholarship include the study of the concept of freedom and leisure studies. In addition to numerous articles, his recent book publications the co-authored book, with Robert A. Stebbins, Serious Leisure and Individuality (2013).
E-mail: <elie.cohen@beitberl.ac.il>