

# CENTER-PERIPHERY, EQUALITY-INEQUALITY, AMERICAN DREAM AND CONSUMERISM IN PAUL AUSTER'S *TIMBUKTU* (1999)

## 1. CENTER-PERIPHERY

On the basic narrative level, Auster's novel reads as a story of friendship between a man and a dog, modeled partly on John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley*<sup>1</sup>, and as a story of unfulfilled desires. Literary works using animal narrators are hardly innovative now and Auster's depiction of friendship between a dog and a man is rather sentimental and lyrical. What is more important for understanding Auster's novel's meaning is the use of motifs, symbols, imagery, tropes and modes (parody, irony) through which Auster points out and criticizes several aspects of American cultural identity, particularly the American Dream (and the idea of achieving success). In addition, developing the motif of the American Dream, Auster points out the nature of the contemporary (postmodern) vision of the world influenced by media, popular culture and consumerism. Auster also addresses the relationship between the dominant and the marginal, the center and the periphery, the important and the unimportant, which all contribute to his symbolic critique of the idea of the American Dream.

The imagery of the center and the periphery seems to dominate this novel. Auster's use of this imagery is often related to the social and cultural status of his characters (belonging to and being rejected by the dominant culture) and is closely connected with the imagery of equality and inequality. Both Willy and Mr. Bones represent various aspects of the connection between the center and the periphery. Willy is a hybrid, marginal, displaced and peripheral character. On the most general level, his Jewish background (his real name is William Gurevitch) qualifies him to the position of a displaced and marginal character with a diasporic identity related to his ancestral heritage. His familial and social status as an outsider and an outcast, that is a character growing up in an incomplete family and rebelling against formal education, further emphasizes his displacement and marginality. Moreover, also his parents' escape from Europe and their consequent social position in the USA significantly contribute to the formation of Willy's symbolic

# 142

status of a displaced character. The narrator comments on his parents' escape from Europe as follows:

There were the ten days they spent hiding in an attic crawl space in Warsaw. There was the month long walk from Paris to the Free Zone in the south, sleeping in haylofts and stealing eggs to stay alive. There was the refugee internment camp in Mende, the money spent on bribes for safe conducts, the four months of bureaucratic hell in Marseille as they waited for Spanish transit visas. Then came the long coma of immobility in Lisbon, the stillborn son Ida delivered in 1944, the two years of looking out at the Atlantic as the war dragged on and their money ebbed away. By the time Willy's parents arrived in Brooklyn in 1946, it wasn't a new life they were starting so much as a posthumous life, an interval between two deaths. Willy's father, once a clever young lawyer in Poland, begged a job from a distant cousin and spent the next thirteen years riding the Seventh Avenue IRT to a button-manufacturing firm on West Twenty-eighth Street (Auster 1999: 13-14).

As can be seen from this extract, Willy's parents become not only ethnically, but also socially displaced characters. Auster further develops the imagery of Willy's marginality and displacement status by depicting him as an unexpected child, as a child refusing his parents' authority, culture and identity, and by his becoming a half-orphan after his father's premature death in the USA. The narrator comments on Willy's relationship to his parents that "He found them alien, wholly embarrassing creatures, a pair of sore thumbs with their Polish accents and stilted foreign ways" (Auster 1999: 14). As a Jewish-Polish boy, Willy is ethnically and socially marginal in the USA; and as an unexpected child and a half-orphan he becomes marginalized both socially and emotionally. Auster, however, further complicates Willy's quest for personal and cultural identity through his developing of the imagery of the center and the periphery which finally results in the depiction of Willy as an entirely alienated, marginalized and outcast character both from within and from the outside. From within because he rejects what can be labeled as a center, that is his parents' Jewish culture and identity, and from the outside because although his first attempts to identify with the American dominant and popular culture seemingly lead him to acquire central status through appreciation of that culture and by being trained in U.S. educational institutions, he later loses his symbolic central position by becoming a dreamer searching for ideals, as well as by being mistreated by health institutions (in the state whose culture he so appreciated) after his "schizo flip-out of 1968, the mad fandango of truth or consequences on a high-voltage tension wire", after which "They shut him up in a hospital, and after six months of shock treatment and psychopharmacological therapy, he was never quite the same again" (Auster 1999: 11).

Willy's travels with Mr. Bones, his dog, elevate him to the status of a eternal traveler and cause him to lose his ethnic and social identity both literally and symbolically. Literally, that is, by becoming alienated and isolated from educational, social (parents, family, school), commercial and cultural institutions (the major publishers who might possibly have published his writing, which is

not commercial and thus remains unpublished); and symbolically because he becomes an outcast and marginal to everything that creates the center, that is what is considered to be standard and the norm. He becomes an eternal marginal character, “a tragic figure, disqualified ...from the rat race of vain hopes and sentimental illusions” (Auster 1999: 15). The imagery creating Willy’s symbolic status of a marginal character is finally completed by his status of an eternal traveler reminiscent of the legendary figure of the Wandering Jew. Reminiscent of this figure, Willy undertakes a symbolic journey between marginal and dominant positions and cultures within which his both literal and symbolic marginality seems to dominate. Mr. Bones represents another marginal character in several ways. His central, regular, common status of an animal (and his status of a typical animal of its kind) is undermined by his ability to think and make judgments which ironically elevates him to the status of a human being. In connection with his dog status itself, paradoxically, seen from the perspective of animals, the above qualities disqualify him from belonging properly to the dog/animal kingdom, thus providing him with rather a marginal position. This is further supported by Mr. Bones’ travels after Willy’s death. During these travels, despite being mostly kindly treated by humans, the understanding of his position by his new masters as “central” (that is common, according to the rules of logic since he is treated as a dog, not as a human being) enables him to acquire the status of a stereotypical and archetypal character (dog), which is the position he refuses (for example, by refusing to be tied up like other dogs). His search, especially after Willy’s death, is not only a search for identity but also a romantic search for peace, friendship and freedom similar to Willy’s. Willy and Mr. Bones thus become symbolically united by both having the status of marginal characters and searchers. At the same time, they both represent a certain alternative and opposition to the central, dominant and thus generally accepted culture and understanding of the world. Both characters become seekers of ideals that represent a rejection of the dominant, central moral, aesthetic, social, emotional and other codes and norms they have to struggle with. As this is an unequal struggle, Auster’s use of the imagery of the center and the periphery is therefore also closely connected with the imagery of equality and inequality.

## 2. EQUALITY — INEQUALITY

Auster’s use of the imagery of equality and inequality is associated with both characters’ status of living beings, with his depiction of different cultural identities, with the vision of the world both characters represent, with the relationship between high and low (popular) culture, and with different kinds of writing as represented in the novel. As analyzed above, from the social, economic and ethnic points of view, in developing the imagery of the center and the periphery, Auster depicts Willy not only as a marginal, peripheral outcast, but also as an unequal character on various levels. Willy is socially unequal because of his family’s lower class and social status; because of his rejection of his family ties, educational institutions, and the social status of an unproblematic citizen. On the basic narrative and semantic level, this manifests itself in Willy’s rejection of his parents’

expectations about his career and social status (his refusal to take a regular and “proper” job that would bring him financial security, and his aspiration to become a writer), in his status of a half-orphan since his early childhood (he becomes socially and emotionally unequal to other children because of the incompleteness of his family), and in his rejection of educational and social institutions which qualifies him to a position of a rebel and outcast since he becomes a drug and alcohol addict, a homeless person, and a traveler. As the omniscient narrator, speaking from the point of view of the dog, Mr. Bones, says: “...by the time he was ready to leave the house and go off to college, he had indelibly cast himself in his chosen role: as malcontent, as rebel, as outlaw poet prowling the gutters of a ruined world (Auster 1999: 16)”. And, as he continues, Willy is “a rambler, a rough-and-ready soldier of fortune, a one-of-a-kind two-leg who improvised the rules as he went along” (28).

Willy’s inequality status further manifests itself in his position of an unpublished, untraditional and experimental rather than commercially successful and popular author. Culturally, his ethnic background has historically cast him into the position of an ethnically unequal and displaced character if seen in the context of the historical understanding of the Jewish cultural identity. But, seen in this context, Auster does not depict binary oppositions emphasizing the positive as opposed to the negative side, like one and the other pole of a binary opposition, but complicates it by the use of fragmentation, irregularity and the principle and imagery of hybridity. Neither equality nor inequality, neither center nor periphery are presented as clear positive or negative oppositions. On the one hand, by rejecting his parents’ cultural and traditional ethnic (Jewish) values, and by accepting the American popular culture values of mass society at the beginning and, on the other hand, through his writing denying the stereotypical clichéd narrative patterns as well as through his status of a rebel against American cultural values later, Willy becomes a symbolically hybrid and ethnically, socially, emotionally and artistically unequal character. By unequal I mean his inequality related to the central and dominant culture and his social position. Willy is thus not depicted only as a rebel against social and cultural norms and traditions, but rather as a symbolical searcher for meaning, existence, social position and his place in the world oscillating between dominant and marginal positions, which enables him to acquire the status of symbolic hybridity that relativizes the clarity of binary oppositions. This also manifests itself in Auster’s depiction of Willy’s writing. Willy’s fragmentary, unfinished, lyrical and stylistically hybrid writing may symbolically suggest a postmodern alternative to commercially successful popular and traditional realistic writing, because that does not offer the pluralistic vision of the world Willy presents through his own writing and vision of the world.

Auster’s depiction of displacement, periphery and inequality, however, is not meant to become a simplistic social criticism as is known from traditional social novels, but it acquires a positive meaning as the expression of cultural resistance to the norm, that is to the culture of commercialism and emotional shallowness Willy, however, has become a part of it by watching TV and identifying with the clichéd image of Santa Claus familiar from popular TV shows. This only confirms his ambiguity and hybrid status offering a pluralistic and relativizing vision of the world.

The same principles apply to Mr. Bones. His outcast position or status is also a position of inequality systematically built by Auster to point out not only a symbolic inequality as the negative aspect of seemingly democratic society, but also as an inequality associated with different kinds of writing and visions of the world. Willy's dog, Mr. Bones, is not a pure breed, and the narrator comments that:

If Mr. Bones had belonged to some recognizable breed, he might have stood a chance in the daily beauty contests for prospective owners, but Willy's sidekick was a hodgepodge of genetic strains—part collie, part Labrador, part spaniel, part canine puzzle—and to make matters worse, there were burrs protruding from his ragged coat, bad smells emanating from his mouth, and a perpetual bloodshot sadness lurking in his eyes [...] Unless Mr. Bones found another master in one quick hurry, he was a pooch primed for oblivion. (Auster 1999: 5)

Old age, a shabby appearance and mixed breed status all qualify Mr. Bones as both an outcast and an unequal animal within the animal kingdom. This position is further supported by his fabricated, fantastic skills. In this sense, he is disqualified from the animal kingdom since he can think, dream, partly understand human language and “had thoroughly mastered the ins and outs of its syntax and grammar” (Auster 1999: 6); he is able to think and has a soul, which are human rather than animal qualities. In addition, inequality imagery and principles manifest themselves in Auster's depiction of his treatment by different people. Despite being nicely treated by a Chinese-American boy, and especially by the Jones family, he is treated as an animal, a dog that must be mostly tied on a leash, which implies his inferior and unequal position, but not only in relation to the human race now.

Auster's systematic use of the imagery of the center and the margin further extended to the imagery of equality and inequality indicates one of the most important ideas expressed in the book, that is of freedom and liberty, which further evoke other connotations. Both Willy's and Mr. Bones' status, but especially their travels, indicate their metaphorical search not only for their ethnic, racial or emotional identity, but also for equality, freedom and tolerance. This search is also reminiscent of Freudian desire and wish fulfillment. In Sigmund Freud's view,

The dream is not comparable to the irregular sounds of a musical instrument, which, instead of being played by the hand of a musician, is struck by some external force; the dream is not meaningless, not absurd, does not presuppose that one part of our store of ideas is dormant while another part begins to awake. It is a perfectly valid psychic phenomenon, actually a wish-fulfilment; it may be enrolled in the continuity of the intelligible psychic activities of the waking state; it is built up by a highly complicated intellectual activity (Freud).

From this perspective, the relationship between Willy and Mr. Bones is the manifestation of an ideal condition and wish fulfillment on two ontological levels at least— in a physical, experiential reality and on the fantastic, imaginary level

as represented especially by the imaginary land of Timbuktu. The relationship between Willy and Mr. Bones represents the relationship between two poles, between reality and dream, between the physical and the spiritual. These two poles complement each other and are transformed into a final spiritual unity in Timbuktu. During his life, Willy provides Mr. Bones with the feeling of equality, freedom and tolerance, that is the qualities that he cannot acquire in his relationship with the majority of other people. As the narrator argues, "...in Mr. Bones's case there was the advantage of being blessed with a master who did not treat him as inferior...Mr. Bones was not just Willy's best friend but his only friend" (Auster 1999: 6).

Mr. Bones also provides Willy with fidelity, emotionality and tolerance, especially by becoming his reader and interpreter in the role of listener to his works, which ironically elevates Willy to the position of a recognized and acclaimed author. As the narrator says, "From Willy, Mr. Bones learned about humor, irony, and metaphorical abundance" (Auster 1999: 31). Mr. Bones is thus not only a listener, but also a parodic interpreter of Willy's works. Since in physical reality the situation is different (Willy is neither a popular nor an acclaimed writer), a desire for freedom, liberty and equality that cannot be accomplished in real life after Willy's death can be realized only symbolically in the imaginary land of Timbuktu, representing an ideal state, freedom, tolerance and humanity.

Here Timbuktu, an African city known as a cultural and educational center, but also a city seen from the European (American) perspective as a distant place, functions as a mythical land in at least two ways — from a religious perspective, as a place of rest for souls, representing a continuation of life in the spiritual form; and as a place of tolerance, freedom and harmony. In addition, the depiction of Timbuktu evokes several other connotations. It is presented especially as a place where "people went after they died. Once your soul had been separated from your body, your body was buried in the ground and your soul lit out for the next world [...] it was located in the middle of a desert somewhere" (Auster 1999: 48). As the narrator continues, it was "an 'oasis of spirits' [...] In order to get there, you apparently had to walk across an immense kingdom of sand and heat, a realm of eternal nothingness" (Auster 1999: 48). However physically and geographically unclear and ambiguous the place might seem, its symbolic meaning is quite evident — Timbuktu becomes a place of pure spirituality, harmony, tolerance, freedom, but especially of equality. Mr. Bones' anthropomorphic name, identity and wish acquire literal fulfillment here since "in Timbuktu dogs would be able to speak man's language and converse with him as equal" (Auster 1999: 49).

Timbuktu thus becomes a symbolic representation of wish fulfillment, a pure ideal state representing an ideal condition and, at the same time, it becomes a symbolic appreciation of spirituality and imagination. Timbuktu, which is the final destination of both Willy's and Mr. Bones' journeys, along with their search for identity, creates a central metaphor and a final unity between the physical and the spiritual, central and the peripheral, equal and unequal that all merge into the sphere of the spiritual. Spirituality as represented by Timbuktu in the novel is connected with spirituality as a positive value associated with goodness, creative imagination, tolerance, freedom and purity.



### 3. AMERICAN REALITY - AMERICAN DREAM AND CONSUMERISM

On the basic narrative level Auster plays with the real and the imaginary (as represented by Mr. Bones' dreams) to emphasize the function of fantasy, and especially dreams. Dreams in this novel represent memories of the past and indicate future action. Mr. Bones' dreams especially not only vivify both Willy's and Willy parents' childhood, European and later American past, but also imply Willy's future death, which actually happens as can be seen from Mr. Bones' dream: "That was when he dreamed the dream in which he saw Willy die. It began with the two of them waking up, opening their eyes and emerging from the sleep they had just fallen into – which was the sleep they were in now, the same one in which Mr. Bones was dreaming the dream (Auster 1999: 64)." Everything which is associated with the physical, biological and empirical acquires negative status in Auster's novel while, on the other hand, the author seems to understand the imaginary and the fantastic as positive elements. As mentioned above, the imaginary and the fantastic can be understood as positive in two ways: as an appreciation of creativity and imagination as opposed to the physical, materialist and consumerist; and as an imaginary realization of what cannot be realized in real life. On the other hand, in Auster's novel the imaginary and the fantastic symbolically evoke the idea of fabrication, that is an artificial creation of reality. In this sense then, the idea of artificial construction of reality is closely connected with the idea of artificial simulation of reality in Jean Baudrillard's understanding, which further evokes negative connotations. By artificial I mean the way characters in the novel perceive reality created by different media, that is reality which is not perceived directly through the individual's contact with nature (reality), but reality which is mediated through different media. In his *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard points out the nature of simulation in technically advanced societies. In his view,

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory— precession of simulacra— it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. (Baudrillard 1988)

Baudrillard further differentiates between representation and simulation:

All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange – God, of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless; it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum: not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference

149

or circumference[...] So it is with simulation, insofar as it is opposed to representation. Representation starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent (even if this equivalence is Utopian, it is a fundamental axiom). Conversely, simulation starts from the Utopia of this principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as reversion and death sentence of every reference. Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum. (Baudrillard 1988)

Auster's depiction of the power of television points out how the mass media influence contemporary culture. This power manifests especially in Willy's understanding of reality in this novel. Willy adopts another name, Christmas, because he is influenced by his vision of Santa Claus on TV, which contributes to his decision to become a prophetic, charitable, good and different person. The narrator suggests that, "He knew the difference between reality and make-believe, and if Santa Claus was talking to him from his mother's television set, that could only mean he was a lot of drunker than he supposed" (Auster 1999: 18). But, as the narrator further continues, "Santa Claus [...] had sprung forth from the depths of Television Land to debunk the certitudes of Willy's skepticism and put his soul back together again [...] Christmas was real, he learned, and there would be not truth or happiness for him until he began to embrace its spirit" (Auster 1999: 21). Willy's vision of reality thus seems to be based on the media image of reality that precedes this vision and influences his decision to become a good person. Willy, however, cannot realize the commercial function of the TV program in which the complexity of Christmas is flattened and becomes only a parodic "reformed" Christian modeled after TV shows and traveling preachers. At the same time, these extracts speak of the transition that Willy's understanding of reality is undergoing. The first extract shows Willy as a rational character able to distinguish between the actual physical world and the world mediated through television. The second extract, however, portrays Willy as a character whose vision is manipulated not only by his alcoholic addiction, but especially by television, which simulates and manipulates reality and blurs the distinction between the real, physical, experiential and the televisual, imaginary and fantastic worlds. Willy lacks a key to the code that would enable him to distinguish between the real and the physical. His aims, attitudes and behavior are modeled after meta-realities (television, dreams, visions) representing different ontological systems. In addition to this, the narrator explains about Willy, "That would be his mission in life from now on: to embody the message of Christmas every day of the year, to ask nothing from the world and give it only love in return. In other words, Willy decided to turn himself into a saint" (Auster 1999: 21).

This passage not only speaks of Auster's critique of televisual simulation and manipulation but it also parodies and criticizes popular culture and stereotypical characters from the TV programs (television preachers, religious programs, reformed alcoholics and drug addicts) as produced by mass media, especially by television. Willy's decision to become almost a saint is thus stimulated by the image



of the whole series of stereotypical transformed and cured alcoholics, drug addicts (transformed into religious and Christian persons), and popular TV preachers as presented in the mass media the victim of which he becomes.

Analyzing Auster's novel *Timbuktu* and the role and power of media and consumerism in this novel, Purnur Üçar argues that

A consumer is manipulated to formulate an identity within the framework that is presented to him/her through the producers [...] Religion for Auster represents another product that one can purchase [...] Belief, just like reality, can be selected from the things presented to us. Selecting a belief and living by it is only a way of creating another simulacrum within the simulacrum. In other words, through belief the consumer is pulled deeper into the simulacrum by the producers. (Üçar 2001)

As can be seen from Üçar's statement, Willy becomes a typical consumerist character influenced by the power of the media, popular culture and popular beliefs that construct his consumer identity and vision of the world. In Üçar's view, "Willy creates the meaning and aim in his life through his TV vision [...] Willy's simulated identity is not his own choice but is only a sample from the various identities presented to him by the producers of the simulacrum of TV. The TV vision Willy had seen becomes Willy himself" (Üçar 2001). A similar vision of reality, influenced by dreams and the dog's ironic anthropomorphic status, applies to Mr. Bones. Üçar argues that "Mr. Bones [...] does not distinguish between a vision and being awake" (Üçar 2001). Auster further complicates the meaning of his use of imagery of equality and artificiality. On the one hand, equality related to different versions of reality (physical and mediated through media and popular culture) implies his critique of consumer and clichéd popular culture. On the other hand, on the structural and narrative level, his blurring of the boundaries between the physical and the imaginary, between reality and dream, televisual and experiential reality suggests the principle of symbolic equality, an equality between the real and the imaginary, physical and simulated, and between narrative and televisual versions of reality. None of these realities is thus depicted as privileged, dominant, superior or inferior, but all are presented as equal and it is up to the reader to choose the most convincing of them. The principle of equality as a positive principle and image applies to different kinds of writing and cultures as well. No writing and culture is privileged in Auster's novel but all are united under the central metaphor of *Timbuktu*, representing spirituality, imagination, creativity, equality and freedom. In addition to this, Auster re-writes the traditional meaning of the American Dream. The American Dream represents an important aspect of American cultural tradition associated with the idea of unlimited opportunities, freedom, commercial and personal success. In Auster's novel, however, the author rather shows the impossibility of the American Dream. Willy, his parents, and Mr. Bones are losers rather than winners, characters unfit for the dominant social structures, who are manipulated by a vision of the American Dream and its popular version in the media, but who are also unable to achieve it during their life. The imaginary land of *Timbuktu* thus indicates the symbolic meaning of the American Dream only

150

as an imaginary construct that can be achieved only in the land of imagination and idealization, which becomes a utopian project creating a myth rather than reality. From the Freudian perspective the symbolic meaning of Timbuktu thus indicates a fulfillment of an unfulfilled desire projected into a dream and fantasy understood as real. Then what seems to be real seen from the Freudian perspective is a symbolic projection of desire rather than a verifiable reality. In other words, in real life equality, liberty and success become illusory and they acquire the status of unfulfilled desires. In other words, this unfulfilled desire implies a critique of the concept of the American Dream as unrealizable for most people.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In his novel *Timbuktu*, using the imagery especially of the center and the periphery developed into the imagery of the equality and inequality, Auster transforms and undermines the original meaning of the idea of the American Dream. He also gives a playful and parodic picture of the contemporary cultural condition. His depiction of different ontological levels (physical reality, television meta-reality, dreams, visions, and fantasy) enables him to blur the distinction between the real and the imaginary and thus to create the effect and imagery of equality. His depiction of characters, especially of Willy and Mr. Bones influenced by popular culture, media (Willy) and dreams (Mr. Bones), is a symbolic expression of the contemporary cultural condition which Auster intends to criticize. Seen in the context of Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation and simulacra, and developing the imagery of equality and inequality, Auster points out the manipulation by television, media and popular culture of the individual's perception of the world. All "realities", on the one hand, become equally significant and important but, on the other hand, having the power of real physical reality, a "reality" mediated through television manipulates characters' perception and vision of the world by giving them a simplistic, artificial and reduced image of reality. At the same time, imagination, fantasy and the imaginary land of Timbuktu form a metaphor of unfulfilled desire associated with life in the USA and with the idea of the American Dream. The ontological level of the physical, empirical and verifiable acquires negative attributes and is associated with failure and unhappiness. On the other hand, the imaginary and fantastic as represented by dreams and the imaginary land of Timbuktu imply positive connotations and are associated rather with equality and freedom. The symbolic meaning of Timbuktu also represents Freudian wish fulfillment, that is the transformation of unfulfilled desires (in real, physical reality) into an "imaginary" realization of reality. At the same time, this narrative strategy implies failure of the American Dream in physical reality, which, since it can be symbolically fulfilled only as a wish, imagination and dream, represents only a utopian project and myth rather than reality. However, the positive connotations associated with the spiritual, imaginary and fantastic represent Auster's appreciation of the imagination, spirituality, and the process of story telling and writing.

1 Alfonz Bednár, a Slovak author, wrote a novella narrated from the perspective of a dog entitled *Za hrst drobných/v kazete z Péšávaru* (1974).

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## SUMMARY

CENTER-PERIPHERY, EQUALITY-INEQUALITY, AMERICAN DREAM AND CONSUMERISM IN PAUL AUSTER'S *TIMBUKTU* (1999)

Although in his novel *Timbuktu* Auster seems to use rather traditional narrative techniques, the narrative from the point of view of a dog represents a fantastic element that evokes doubts about the authenticity of the image of reality mediated through this character. Auster's construction of the narrative in this novel is reminiscent of the fairy tale, which requires a sensibility that undermines belief in the mimetic representation of reality. My paper analyzes Auster's construction of reality, his use of fantastic and metafictional elements and the way metafictional narrative techniques, imagination, fantasy and storytelling create an alternative space to the rational and consumerist approach to the world which the characters in the novel are influenced by. This article also deals with Auster's symbolic treatment of the failure of the American Dream as symbolically expressed through his depiction of the relationships between the center and periphery.

Dealing with Paul Auster's fiction, many critics emphasize the postmodern character of his work, but not so many of them have commented on his depiction of marginal characters and their symbolic connection to the idea of the American Dream.<sup>1</sup> I will not, therefore, focus on analysis of the manifestation of postmodernism in this novel. In this paper I will focus on Auster's use of the imagery of the center and the periphery, equality and inequality, and the way he uses them to show the inadequacy of one of the most important myths related to American cultural identity— the American Dream. Further, I will explore Auster's depiction of the nature of the postmodern cultural condition influenced by media, popular culture and consumerism.

**KEYWORDS:** postmodern fiction, center, periphery, consumerism, parody, irony, writing, fantasy, imagination, media.