CHAPTER VI

AN EXCESS OF SIGNS
The postmodern age has seen the disappearance of the referential finalities like the concepts of power, truth, and history. Signs have taken up their places. As result, reality itself has become problematic. Lucy's analysis of Baudrillard's concept should be referred to in this context:

Baudrillard's argument is that reality no longer appears as such, but rather has become its appearances. Social knowledge nevertheless continues to be based on the reality (or the presence) of the real, because the function of the postmodern sign is to disguise the fact that reality is no longer with us. (39-40)

Society has lost all human values. Its status is now reduced to that of the semiological: "All along the 'will to power' had never been anything more than a brilliant inferno for the liquidation of the 'real' and for the processing of society into the dark and seductive empire of the sign" (Kroker and Cook 33). Thus the logic of the sign is something that lies hidden within the realm of power: "In the simulacrum, power is positive, charismatic and seductive: a technology of hypersymbolization is at work which functions by processing culture and economy into a sign-system (a radical structuralism) and endlessly deployable in its rhetoric and always circular in its movement" (Kroker and Cook 75). Power works through a system of signs to exploit the masses. Baudrillard has analysed the impact of the domination of signs:

Particularly in his writings on aesthetics and postmodernity, Baudrillard is concerned with the rupture in postmodern discourse represented by the collapse of the normalising, expanding, and positive cycle of the social into its opposite: an implosive and structural order of signs. In this interpretation, the triumph of signifying culture means the eclipse of genuine social solidarities (society). (Kroker and Cook 172-73)
Ferdinand de Saussure has analysed the nature of the sign in *Course in General Linguistics*: "Since I mean by the sign the whole that results from the associating of the signifier with the signified, I can simply say: the linguistic sign is arbitrary" (Cahoon, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* 179). This concept reveals the relative autonomy of language in relation to reality. What we call meaning is constituted by a word's difference from all other words in a language. Language forms a system, within which exists these differences. It projects not the reality, but only what functions as reality.

Saussure's theory prompted Jacques Lacan to probe into the sliding of the signified under the signifier, and thus acknowledge the lack that characterises language. Reality functions within the realm of this lack. Meaning is produced through the process of negation, and hence there is a paradox within language. Lucy has analysed Lacan's observations regarding this paradox:

Language is full of emptiness, as it were, and that is precisely (if paradoxically) why it is so full of excess. Because signifieds are merely the structural effects of a system of differential signifiers, language can be said to be empty: signifieds are precisely what are not in that system, though they may be of it. At the same time, signifieds are only ever arbitrarily or conventionally related to signifiers and so, in principle, any signifier can lead to an association (if only contingently) with any number of possible signifieds. An excess of signification is always possible. (23-24)

Derrida has probed into the signification that occurs during this free play of signs. However he does not say that the process of deciphering significances will lead to any final significance. Derrida does not speak about a final significance because he does not believe in a centre that will limit the play of meanings. He points out in the essay "Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences:"
Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play.

(Lodge, *Modern Criticism* 110)

Culture is a signifying system through which a social order is made manifest. However in the postmodern era, capitalism has colonised the signifying patterns of culture. What capitalism projects is the sign-system of the simulacra. The simulacra consists of images which have no connection to any content. This forms the defence mechanism of capitalism to hide the ugly reality of its social and cultural order. According to Baudrillard, postmodern social life is motivated by "'a set of signs, dedicated exclusively to their recurrence as signs, and no longer to their 'real goal' at all'" (qtd. in McGowan 18). Capitalism wields its power though the realm of signs. It alters and recycles cultural signifiers for promotional purposes. The play of signs suits the profit motive of capitalism. According to Jameson, cultural revolution occurs at times during which"'the dynamics of sign systems of several distinct modes of production can be registered and apprehended'"(qtd. in McGowan 152). Society has itself become so conditioned by the strategies of capitalism that it now craves for spectacles comprised of signs.

The commodity has became very powerful and the promotional culture associated with it is creating the impression that the image is real. The system of exchange itself depends on signs. The sign-form contains the commodity-form within itself. Baudrillard has made a study of the relationship between the commodity and the sign: "In the *simulational* scheme of advanced capitalist society, use value and exchange value conflate into mirrored *aspects* of a
single process of abstract, semiological reproduction: [. . .]" (Kroker and Cook 180)

The medium as represented by television, is one pervaded by a floating order of signs. It occupies a central position in postmodern culture. This is a culture that places simulation above everything. The masses who have been conditioned by it crave for the hyperreality provided by the television screen. The images on the television screen inevitably function as signs. These images form the logic behind the postmodern culture which is on the verge of an implosion. Thus television has become the ultimate postmodern cultural symbol. It accommodates all social phenomena into the sign-system perpetuated by its technology. However it cannot be denied that the signs projected just form part of a hi-tech society facing emotional deprivation:

That's TV: it is the break-point where capital in its final and most advanced form as a spectral image begins to disappear into itself and becomes that which it always was: an empty and nihilistic sign-system of pure mediation and pure exchange which, having no energy of its own, adopts a scorched earth policy towards the missing social matter of society. (Kroker and Cook 276)

Because of its great influence on the masses, television has become "a simulated and hyperreal sign of life" (Kroker and Cook 277). Man has become a prisoner in the labyrinth of the sign-system. His senses are dulled through perpetual simulation. His self as such is seduced by the images on the television screen. Moreover, his body becomes a site for the play of signs:

The body is a power grid, tattooed with all the signs of cultural excess, on its surface, encoded from within by the language of desire, broken into at will by the ideological interpellation of
the subject, and all the while, held together as a fictive and
concrete unity by the illusion of 'misrecognition.' (Kroker and
Cook 26)

Then there is the issue of the play of signs within a text. According to
the principles of semiotics, a text does not exclusively mean something that
is spoken or written. It is one that includes all sorts of signs. Even social and
cultural practices appear as signs within a text. All these signs exist in varying
interrelationships. This multiplicity of signs will inevitably provoke multiple
readings and interpretations. The analysis of the signs which exist in opposition
in the text, results in the subversion of the meaning of the text. Thus texts
function as semiotic constructs in the postmodern world. Intertextuality can be
looked upon as a phenomenon resulting from the multiplicity of relations
between signs. The language of signs in the real world finds expression in the
text also. These signs become an excess within the text. There is no final
meaning in this text. What can be seen instead is the play of signification. The
signs just indulge in the deferral of meaning. This in turn leads to a deconstructive
reading of the text.

The cultural signification in texts has been analysed by Claude Lévi-
Strauss. According to him, cultural activities are specific signifying practices.
Hence he analyses cultural artifacts in terms of signs. His method involves a
thorough search of the text for cultural signs. Then the systems and patterns
that underlie cultural signification are analysed. The French structuralists also
followed a similar method: "As a school of literary criticism, French
structuralism was dedicated to explaining literature as a system of signs and
codes and the conditions which allow that system to function, including relevant
cultural frames" (ConDavis and Schleifer 141). The structuralists consider language as "a system of signs arbitrarily employed in signification" (Ruland and Bradbury 419).

In *Unsent Letters*, Bradbury has used the term "Havenization" (171), to refer to the domination of signs in the postmodern world. He has defined this term: "Havenization is the great split between signifier and signified -- a way of using language not to describe but to replace grim reality" (171). Bradbury further analyses the nature of language itself:

Language is a grid imposed on chaos. We do not speak it; it speaks us. It got here first, before we noticed, and programmed us to learn it. It had no time to give things their right names, just arbitrary signs, which only made sense within a total linguistic system. All linguistic systems are different, being based on different codes. (166-67)

In the postmodern society, the fields of art, advertising, photography, public relations, fashion, management, marketing, and so on are concerned with the production of signs:

We live, after all, in a crowded, noisy, polyglot, competitive world, a world which is a real scream. Imagine it as a place of endlessly competing signs, languages, signals, and codes, rather like an airport on a holiday weekend when the weather pattern is unfavourable. Signs flash, arrows point here and there, flight boards flutter desperately as they overload with conflicting information, messages over the loudspeakers grow more frantic and more and more languages come at you every minute, until at last you go to the wrong place and watch your plane take off without you. We call this the condition of redundancy [...]. (Bradbury, *Unsent Letters* 169-170)
It is certainly this world of signs that Bradbury has portrayed in *HM*, *RE*, and *DC*. The people who occupy the social space in this world show an obsession with signs. The parties described in *HM* reflect the tendency of young men and women to wear clothes that correspond to the codes of fashion. In capitalist society, there is always the “production and consumption of a *simulacra of signs* which work to inscribe the text of the body in the shifting ideological styles of the fashion industry” (Kroker and Cook 19). The fashionable crowd takes pleasure also in the subversion of the system of signs inherent in clothing. Hence a conference attended by Criminale shows people indulging in cross-dressing. Criminale's crowded social world reveals him to be “an excess of signs--signs of thought and sex, politics and money, fame and shame” (*DC* 245).

Dialogic interaction as such is presented as a game involving signs in the three novels. Petworth’s discussions in Slaka generate just a profusion of signifiers. At the same time, the search for the signified proves to be futile. The language of Slaka produces just linguistic anxiety in Petworth. It is an experience that is reflected in the lecture, he gives to the academic community at Slaka:

[... ] he explains that a new form of language is emerging in the world, divorced from its original cultural associations, dislocated and displaced, a Spranglais of potent proportions, manifest everywhere. Signs and advertisements everywhere employed it [...]. Behind the language was a world culture, itself divesting itself of its traditional rooted signs; a new world of the plurilingual and the distorted, of the sign floating free of the signified, was upon us. (*RE* 193)

Petworth's words point towards the changes taking place at the semiotic level in the realm of culture. Because of these changes, the postmodern world is certainly being exposed to an "accelerating semiological implosion" (Kroker and Cook 34)
The sexuality in the postmodern world that undergoes exaggeration and distortion the realm of signs, is reflected in the novels. They contain instances of the regular exposure of the masses to sexual imagery that exploits and commodifies the female body. The power of the fashion photographs appearing in magazines is revealed in *HM*. Socialist Slaka depends on the semiotics of the striptease for the entertainment of the tourists. Meanwhile Criminale is one who adorns his rooms with the nude photographs of his wives and mistresses. He believes that the waste in postmodern culture is released through the signs of sexuality.

The sphere of art as portrayed in the novels shows spectacles comprised of signs. The opera that Petworth sees in Slaka is one that contains colourful disguises and multiplying narratives. It functions as an excess of signs that evades the strategies for interpretation. The field of art as such has been taken over by the mass media which generate a powerful network of signs. Continuous exposure to these signs has created in the masses the delusion that an object assumes relevance only when it undergoes reduction to an image in a photograph or on the television screen. Jay himself experiences this process of reduction: "And there -- right in the middle of the main monitor -- I was, just like Mrs. Dalloway at her party. Except somehow I seemed to be not quite I, but some terrible yet oddly accurate simulacrum" (*DC* 14). An extravagant spectacle projecting the signifiers of the postmodern pluralistic society, beamed worldwide from the Eiffel Tower is also referred to in *DC*. The series of images projected by television functions as a network of signs having an impact on culture: "[...]
television has the unreal existence of an imagic sign-system in which may be read the inverted and implosive logic of the cultural machine" (Kroker and Cook 176).
The three novels exhibit intertextuality to a very great extent. This again constitutes an excess of signs. The novels are dense with references to various other texts, some written by real-life personalities and others attributed to the characters in them. The history of Slaka itself appears as a text in RE. As far as Petworth's personal experience is concerned, his lack of familiarity with the language of Slaka leads to him being exposed to yet another world of signs. He sees just "shelves upon shelves of books, the millions of infolded words, all written in the language he does not know. Some are titled in the Cyrillic alphabet, some in the Latin, but the alphabet does not matter for the codes will not yield, the signs refuse to become meaning" (RE 111). In the case of Jay, it is the experience as a journalist that provides exposure to the signs of popular culture. He has also undergone his education in the age of deconstruction. His quest for Criminale thus becomes essentially a quest for signs. During this quest, Jay gets caught in "a great porridge of confusing stories, an excess of signs, financial and political and historical and sexual, a bulging bundle of obscurities and secrets" (IX 218). Jay cannot help obeying the logic of the age in which he lives: "Just as today we study not the author but the text, so now we study not the person but the sign" (Bradbury, Unsent Letters 174).

Architecture forms another space for the play of signs in the novels. The sign-system of Watermouth presented in HM is one that shows contrast and conflict. Hotel Slaka contains many signs of excess that defy socialist restrictions. Many structures contain the reflecting surfaces of mirrors that project a multiplicity of images. The surveillance system that covers all the spaces in Slaka reduces architecture itself to a series of images. At the airport of Slaka, travellers are exposed to a multitude of signs and ultimately get themselves reduced to signs. The styles of the past and the present intermingle
in postmodern architectural structures, further facilitating the unlimited play of signs. This play provides fascination, but denies interpretation. Architectural structures themselves form signs on the topography of cities, and the Eiffel Tower is one such sign:

The Tower is [...] present to the entire world. First of all as a universal symbol of Paris, it is everywhere on the globe where Paris is to be stated as an image [...]. Further: beyond its strictly Parisian statement, it touches the most general human image-repertoire: its simple, primary shape confers upon it the vocation of an infinite cipher; [...] the symbol of Paris, of modernity, of communication, of science [...] it is the inevitable sign [...].

(Sontag, A Barthes Reader 237)

It is an open-ended structure that can be subjected to infinite interpretation. At the same time, it is a unique work of architecture which does not reveal any message. Thus it is a sign that does not represent anything: "Eiffel’s Tower was a monument to only one thing: itself" (DC 87). After a hundred years a Chinese-American architect, Pei, made a crystal pyramid as a part of the centennial celebrations of the Eiffel Tower. Such structures are meant to satisfy the masses conditioned by the cultural semiotics of postmodernism. Tourists are travelling around the world, in search of such signs: "The tourist is interested in everything as a sign of itself, an instance of a typical cultural practice [...]" (Culler 155). The tourist feels that the sign provides the most authentic experience for him.

The novels also concentrate on the surfaces of culture which become sites for the play of signs. Such surfaces are seen in abundance in the supermarkets and multiple stores of Watermouth. The obsession with signs
generates consumption at all levels. Hence the professors of the University of Watermouth decorate their houses with postmodern commodities as well as with pre-modern artefacts. The British diplomats posted at Slaka have the habit of collecting the souvenirs of the different countries they visit. The extent of commodification in Slaka is seen in the girls who have their prices marked on the soles of their shoes. These prices function as signs that reduce them to commodities. The unstable economy of Slaka has created a fluctuating rates of exchange. It attempts to turn sign into value, but actually paves way for the further play of signs. In DC, money appears as a fiction in the form of the data that flickers on computer screens. In this situation, fraud becomes a game involving signs. Jay encounters a series of signs of commodification during his travels through different countries. In every country, Jay perceives the universal language of signs projected by the advertisements of various commodities. Even symbols of national culture like Mozart and Don Giovanni are made to serve the purposes of capitalism. The fascination that an intellectual like Criminale has for products carrying exclusive brand names, further shows that the process of commodification through the agency of signs is an all pervasive one.

Since history has taken the form of a series of events separated by gaps and fissures, it can be perceived only as an excess of signs in the three novels. Howard is a radical professor who experiences the pressure arising from this historical predicament. The students who find themselves oppressed by the same condition express themselves through graffiti which function as a sign-system of resistance. In Slaka, the power of state is exerted through the symbols of ideology. Any change in the power structure, is indicated by the realignment of these symbols. Texts as well as events that mark the transition from the modern to the postmodern dominate DC. The novel reflects the processes that transform historical events into the flickering images on the television screen.
Criminale is a philosopher who has experienced historical changes at the semiotic level. Hence he has discarded the symbols of ideology to embrace the images of capitalism.

Thus the postmodern culture is one that shows the domination of signs: "Nietzsche recognised that the sovereignty of the sign [. . . ] meant the final reduction of society to the (abstract, semiological, and structural) language of willing" (Kroker and Cook 33). Humanity will inevitably get entrapped in the production and consumption of signs. This results in reification, and not in signification.