

# Deconstructing master-narrative: the postmodern view of history in volkswagen blu...



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History is written by the victorious, the dominating nation, the ruling class, and subaltern voices are overpowered and unheard. Jean-Francois Lyotard, in his *The Postmodern Condition*, critiques the historical master-narrative, the vision of history as a totalizing narrative schema that reflects a singular perspective: “ I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives... The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal.”[1] The all-encompassing, goal-oriented master-narrative is only a means to legitimize a subjective vision as truth. In its place, postmodernists argue, marginalized, localized, subaltern histories must be heard.[2] Jacques Poulin’s *Volkswagen Blues* reflects the postmodern condition in its unraveling of the traditional, colonial, white supremacist portrayal of American history, opening with, “ We are no longer the heroes of history” (Poulin). In their experience of Diego Rivera’s Detroit Industry mural, Jack and La Grande Sauterelle find themselves in the role of both creator and victim of a grand master-narrative to reveal the inadequacy of a totalizing, determinate vision of history.

The vehement opposition to Rivera’s representation of race in the Detroit Industry murals reflects the white fear of having its singular vision of history challenged. Edsel Ford, son of Henry Ford, commissioned Rivera in 1930 to paint 27 panels on the walls in the courtyard of the Detroit Institute of Arts depicting the spirit of Detroit (Goodall 457). Rivera decided to portray the industrial production and assembly of Ford’s V8 engine, from the extracting of mineral ore from the soil to the completed automobile driving off into the sunset. Rivera topped his mural with large representations of the four component races of the American continent: black, white, red, and yellow.

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His reasoning was to connect present day America with the source of its wealth, its aboriginal roots, and the multiple races that contribute to its industry. As Alex Goodall explains, “ Rivera saw a principal function of his work as contributing to a grand vision of Western continental unity, an attempt to grapple with the idea of Americanism, and strip from it what he saw as encrustations of European culture” (473). Yet white middle and upper classes attacked the painting as “ un-American” (473) because it did not reflect their vision of superior European legacy. As Rivera’s biographer explained, “ People looked for the statuesque female of classic drapes... holding a tiny automobile in one hand and a lighted torch in the other” (469). Goodall observed, “ Underlying this was the fear expressed by European elites that non-white culture might come to eclipse the Western European legacy in the United States” (473). Rivera attacked his detractors’ narrow vision of history, saying, “ What they decry as an ‘ un-American invasion’, [is] namely the pictorial representation of the basis of their city’s existence and the source of its wealth, painted by a direct descendant of aboriginal American stock!” (473). In essence, the negative reaction to Rivera’s work reflects two competing visions of history: the dominating white and its view of its own European supremacy and the marginalized minority who wants voice for his contribution. Rivera saw Americanism in its aboriginal roots while white Americans wanted to see it in its western, Greco-Roman European origins.

Jacques Poulin too reflects the white rejection of America’s aboriginal roots in favor of a Eurocentric vision. The legend of Eldorado, of the “ chief of an Indian tribe” who “ would shed all his clothes, coat his body with a resinous <https://assignbuster.com/deconstructing-master-narrative-the-postmodern-view-of-history-in-volkswagen-blues-and-diego-riveras-detroit-industry-murals/>

substance, and roll in powdered gold” and then with his “ gilded body” dive “ into the water” (Poulin 17) reemerges when Jack and La Grande Sauterelle arrive at the “ Royal Bank Plaza” with its “ glass panels dusted with gold” and “ two golden prisms:” “ The building looked as bright and warm as honey, and they couldn’t help thinking about the gold of the Incas and about the legend of Eldorado” (55). The echo of Eldorado in the present mirrors Rivera’s depiction of America’s contemporary wealth sourced from an aboriginal past. At the same time, the Spanish European ring to “ Royal Plaza” conjures the Age of Exploration so that within the image of the bank is the clash of European and indigenous boundaries. What once belonged to Indians, now has been transferred so that white culture is indebted to its aboriginal origin of wealth. However, even as he realizes this historical indebtedness, Jack still reveals a longing to retain a master-narrative of white supremacist history: “ It was as if every dream was still possible. And for Jack, in his heart of hearts, it was as if all the heroes of his past were still heroes” (55). Jack cannot simultaneously exalt an Indian legend, while calling white explorers and conquerors heroes. As La Grande Sauterelle tells him, “ When you talk about the discoverers and explorers of America... I’ve got nothing in common with the people who came looking for gold and spices and a passage to Asia. I’m on the side of the people who were robbed of their lands and of their way of life” (16-7). The conflict in views reveals the historical use of a singular totalizing master-narrative as a means by those in power to affirm and justify their dominance, to create heroes out of murderers and stifle the voice of the conquered and defeated.

Rivera's inclusion of four races also undermines the historical master-narrative by forwarding racial integration and miscegenation. The selection of the four specific races comes from José Vasconcelos' theory of The Cosmic Race. Vasconcelos was the Minister of Education in Mexico from 1921-24 who launched the Mexican mural movement and was thus responsible for bringing Rivera to fame (Jaén xxiii). In his *The Cosmic Race*, Vasconcelos upturned the colonial mentality of mestizaje, or mixed race, as degenerate and inferior, writing: " Thus we have the four stages and the four racial trunks: the Black, the Indian, the Mongol, and the White. The latter, after organizing itself in Europe, has become the invader of the world, and has considered itself destined to rule, as did each of the previous races during their time of power. It is clear that domination by the whites will also be temporary, but their mission is to serve as a bridge. The white race has brought the world to a state in which all human types and cultures will be able to fuse with each other. The civilization developed and organized in our times by the whites has set the moral and material basis for the union of all men into a fifth universal race, the fruit of all the previous ones and amelioration of everything past (9)... The Yankees will end up building the last great empire of a single race, the final empire of White supremacy... What is going to emerge out there is the definitive race, the synthetical race, the integral race, made up of the genius and the blood of all peoples (20)... We in America shall arrive, before any other part of the world, at the creation of a new race fashioned out of the treasures of all the previous ones: The final race, the cosmic race (40)."

Mary Coffrey explains that Vasconcelos “elevated racial miscegenation to a transcendent eugenic principle” (Coffrey 46). By converting racial impurity from a “sign of shame into one of pride” Vasconcelos “attacked the colonial legacy of inferiority attributed to miscegenated populations” (46). The colonial hierarchy of subjugator and subjugated arises from racial differentiation, which will end with the cosmic race because it will be the race “in which all other races disappear” (Jaén xvi).

La Grande Sauterelle is victim to the master-narrative of colonial history. She laments, “I’m not even a real Indian” and “she began again to say that she was neither Indian nor white, but something in between and that, in the end, she was nothing at all,” believing the traditional white supremacist vision of the degradation of an impure race (Poulin 169). But Jack echoes the revolutionary sentiments of Vasconcelos, saying, “You say that you’re ‘something in between’... Well, I don’t agree with you at all. I think you’re something new, something that’s beginning. You’re something that has never been seen before. And that’s it” (169). He articulates a revolutionary hopefulness, a fusion that suggests a new world order much like Vasconcelos’ notions of a final cosmic race of mixed identity. Jack falls asleep thinking that La Grande Sauterelle was “an extraterrestrial” not rooted to the land and hence not tied to superficial territorial boundaries that separate nations and drive discrimination, conquest and suppression (170). That she has never had a house before the Volkswagen further emphasizes her transcendence of national boundaries that entrench colonial notions of dominance.

The four racial figures in Rivera's mural are furthermore all women but with androgynous features; Rivera thus undermines another element of the western historical master-narrative: patriarchal dominance. Critic George Derry harshly wrote, " Will the women of Detroit feel flattered when they realize that they are embodied in the female with the hard, masculine, unsexed face, ecstatically staring for hope and help across the panel to the languorous and grossly sensual Asiatic sister on the right" (Wolfe 349)? Derry encapsulates female stereotypes and implicitly articulates the male desire for women to be delicate, effeminate, subservient and modest. Critic Edmund Wilson furthers sexist discrimination, denouncing the workingwomen in the mural as " ranks of pale sexless virgins excising the glands of animals" thereby highlighting his patriarchal view of the inappropriateness of women in industry[3].

La Grande Sauterelle likewise challenges the patriarchal perspective of history. The persistence of a male dominated historical perspective first appears when La Grande Sauterelle stops at the grave of chief Thayendanega. " Women in the Six Nations confederacy, of which the Mohawks were part" played an " important role" (Poulin 56-7) yet the name of Thayendanega's wife is absent from the cemetery: " her name was not indicated" (57). The female's role in history is overpowered by her subservience to her male counterpart. However, La Grande Sauterelle, by wearing Jack's clothes not only looks " exactly like a boy" (46), she also unravels traditional male ownership of females: Jack tells her " You're free and you don't belong to me" (91). She also takes the role of a man when she aggressively approaches Jack at the Continental Divide and speaks lines <https://assignbuster.com/deconstructing-master-narrative-the-postmodern-view-of-history-in-volkswagen-blues-and-diego-riveras-detroit-industry-murals/>

suggestive of sexual assault and mocks his emasculation: “ You could have said: WATCH OUT! or STOP! or NO! That doesn’t take long. Or you could have said HELP!... Or MAMA!” (167).

But while La Grande Sauterelle and Jack appear as victims of the historical tradition of a master-narrative, they also appear as perpetrators of this rationalized, totalizing mode of history, creating their own simplifications that disregard subaltern voices. While inside the Detroit Institute of Arts, they describe the Rivera mural as having an “ overall effect [that] was one of heaviness, sadness and exhaustion” (65) yet as soon as they leave, they imagine a rationally contorted history: “ They agreed that the red car was a symbol for happiness and that Rivera had wanted to express something every simple: happiness is rare and getting it requires a lot of trouble, fatigue and effort” (68-9). The red is most directly evocative of the Ford Hunger March carried out by the working class a month before Rivera’s arrival in Detroit. Five thousand unemployed autoworkers marched with red flags on the River Rouge plant that later served as the model factory for Rivera’s mural. Violence broke out when the Dearborn police force tried to halt the uprising. One observer said the “ police went after them, wielding truncheons to turn them back, and the marchers retaliated with whatever lay to hand: rocks, lumps of slag, fence posts” (Lee 210). Hundreds were wounded and four workers died in the conflict. In the funeral march, the “ coffins of the four were draped in red, the procession of fifteen thousand mourners wore red armbands or carried red flags, and the band played the ‘ Internationale’ and the funeral march of the Russian revolutionaries” (210).

Following the tradition of creating history as a master-narrative with heroes, <https://assignbuster.com/deconstructing-master-narrative-the-postmodern-view-of-history-in-volkswagen-blues-and-diego-riveras-detroit-industry-murals/>

goals, logical causality and deterministic ends, Jack and La Grande Sauterelle rationalize the tragic history of the workers and thereby disempower them by denying them the full magnitude of their suffering.

The subjugation to a master-narrative of another revolutionary group historically disempowered occurs again in the song *Le Temps des Cerises*, which La Grande Sauterelle sings when she and Jack tire of country music on the road. Cherry time is the sentimental name of the Paris Commune, the short-lived democratic republic of the French working-class of 1871. The *Tribune de Geneve* explains the red use of cherry symbolism: “ Les cerises évoquent différentes choses. D’une part, elles rappellent, par leur couleur, le sang et le drapeau rouge, liés entre autres à la Commune, ce qui fait que la chanson demeure associée à l’idée de liberté, de solidarité, et de résistance face à l’oppression.”[4] (Cherries evoke different things. On one hand, they recall by their color, blood and the red flag of the Commune, so that the song still remains associated with the idea of freedom, solidarity, and resistance against oppression.) But the reduction of the bloody memory, in which over 10, 000 died in Paris, to a romantic song denies the Communards agency by oppressing them under a trivializing history[5].

Ultimately the resolution to the controversy over Rivera’s Detroit Industry murals reflects the acceptance of the postmodern pluralistic view of history over the traditional master-narrative. Opposition to the murals wanted them acid washed or torn down, but the contention subsided when Edsel Ford affirmed his approval of the provocative works: “ I admire Rivera’s spirit. I really believe he was trying to express his idea of the spirit of Detroit.”[6] In

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expressing that Rivera's work is reflective of an individual perspective of a moment in time separate and different from everyone else's views and not at all reflective of his own, an American, or any other totalizing, correct perspective, Ford essentially propounds that history is subject to personal interpretation. He hence denies the authority of a singular grand objective history.

La Grande Sauterelle manifests the same overthrow of master-narrative through an affirmation of pluralistic history. She expresses her engagement with pluralistic narratives in her judgment of books: " You shouldn't judge books one by one. I mean, you mustn't see them as independent objects. A book is never complete in itself; to understand it you must put it in relation to other books, not just books by the same author, but also books written by other people. What we think is a book most of the time is only part of another, vaster book that a number of authors have collaborated on without knowing it." (Poulin 124-5) The book represents a microcosm of written history, so that her final statement can be read as " What we think is history most of the time is only part of another, vaster history that a number of rulers/authors/historians have collaborated on without knowing it." History should furthermore never be seen as " complete in itself," but should stand " in relation to other" histories. The European explorers heroes of Jack are one and the same destroyers of La Grande Sauterelle's past. History is subject to personal interpretation. There exists no one correct, all-encompassing historical truth.

Just as Rivera's murals challenged the master-narrative of white supremacist history through their depiction of racial miscegenation, reversed gender roles, and minority contribution, so too does La Grande Sauterelle shatter Jack's recognition of history as a narrative of heroic, male white conquerors. Jack ultimately gives up his traditional vision of history, exclaiming, "Don't talk to me about heroes!" (213) But even as La Grande Sauterelle and Jack recognize the plurality of perspectives in historical representation, Poulin portrays them as oblivious to their own trivialization of history into platitudes and popular songs. In the end, they are both creators and victims of the traditional vision of history as a master-narrative with purpose and direction even as they realize its fictionality.

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