GENERATION X AND *HAPPINESS*™: FROM CYNICAL LOSERS TO MATERIALISTIC PRICKS?

ULDUZ MASCHAYKH

In 1991 the Canadian author and artist Douglas Coupland launched a book whose title became the leading reference to define the generation born between 1958 and 1968 (Coupland, 'Generation X').[1] In the past two decades many interpretations of the term 'Generation X' have been proposed. According to a paper by Poindexter and Lasorsa**,** Generation X–ers are understood to be 'cynical, apathetic, disrespectful losers and slackers' (29). Born after the post–World War II Baby Boomer Generation, the Generation X–ers are far outnumbered by the Baby Boomers. Statistically, the Baby Boomer Generation comprises 32.7% of Canada's total population, whereas only 18% belong to Generation X. That is why they are also known as the Generation Bust, as defined by David Foot.

In my paper I will proceed in the following fashion. First, the term Generation X will be used as defined by Canadian author Douglas Coupland. I will focus on the portrayal of the characters in his novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991) and examine how the author depicts the members of this demographic group in his narrative. In the second section, I will compare Coupland's characters to those shown in Will Ferguson's novel *Happiness™,* which was published in 2002, over a decade after Coupland's book. In the third section, I will evaluate whether the protagonists in Coupland's book conform to the image of 'cynical, apathetic, disrespectful losers'. Further examination will be given to whether the three protagonists in Coupland's novel can be distinguished from the ones in Ferguson's *Happiness™.*

Defining Generation X–ers

In 1987 Douglas Coupland published an article in the *Vancouver Magazine* which labelled the post–Baby–Boomer crowd as 'Generation X' for the first time. The article was a great success and consequently turned into a regular 'Generation X' column and comic strip in the Toronto magazine *Vista* in 1988.

According to Coupland, the term was derived from Billy Idol's band before the singer became famous as a solo artist. In a *Vista* article of 1989, Coupland explains that the term 'Generation X' encompasses well–educated young people born after the Baby Boomer Generation to middle– and upper–middle–class families. The 'X' stands for something that is hard to define, reflecting the Generation X–ers' feeling of displacement and isolation from society. However, they typically had safe and privileged upbringings in wealthy and secure areas, such as Shaugnessy (Vancouver), Oakville (Toronto) or Orange County (Los Angeles). This is why they believe that no matter what the world confronts them with, there is always a safety–net (i.e. their parents) that will bail them out of any trouble. Since many of them still live at their parents' home, Generation X–ers experience an enormous dependence on the safe and secure homes of Mom and Dad, who are members of the Baby Boomer Generation.

Emotionally and idealistically, Generation X–ers are driven by a strong sense of nostalgia, as they believe that things used to be better in the old days (i.e. in the age of the Baby Boomer Generation).[2] Insisting on their own individuality, Generation X–ers refuse to follow any common trends, be it in fashion, food, design or any other subject. One of the key characteristics of the Generation X–ers is their general antagonism towards the Baby Boomer Generation, as the former group's members feel that they silently exist in the shadow of the born–at–the–right–time generation, which occupied all the great opportunities ahead.[3] Unlike the Baby Boomer Generation, Generation X–ers have their dreams dashed and aspirations shattered because of the harsh reality of the late 1980s economy. They have to face the fact that there is a discrepancy between what they desire in their own visions and what reality can and will offer them. There are also some characteristics regarding the Generation X–ers' work attitude: avoiding boring nine–to–five jobs, which require team–spirit and involve repetition or number crunching. Instead, Generation X–ers search for creative, flexible and free–spirited occupations. Some of the jobs they favour are in communications, broadcasting, writing and the arts.

Even though the *Vista* column strip continued to be successful until 1989, it was not until the publication of Douglas Coupland's novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* that the term was introduced and popularised in Western culture. Published in 1991, Coupland's novel was a great success as a book in a television–dominated culture because it gave voice to an entire generation. The story starts with protagonist and first–person narrator Andy, whose actual name is Andrew Palmer (*GX* 47), describing his teenage memory

of lying in a farmer's field in Manitoba, with a 'mood of darkness and inevitability and fascination' capturing him at that moment (*GX* 3). With this opening chapter, the reader is introduced to the ambiguous feelings of people of Andy's age. It is the apathetic, lethargic, nihilistic feeling of isolation and displacement that defines most twenty–something–year–olds of his generation: the Generation X.

That feeling of isolation and displacement is the subject matter along the entire novel. Structured in three main chapters, the main narrative revolves around the lives and social relationships of the twenty–something–year–olds Andy Palmer, Clair Baxter and Dag (mer) Belinghausen. The first chapter introduces the main protagonists, emphasising their quest for freedom and independence in a transgressive fiction:

> We live small lives on the periphery. We are marginalized and there is a great deal in which we choose not to participate. We wanted silence and we have that silence now. (*GX* 11)

In order to depict the characters' inner and outer conflicts, Coupland uses the first–person narrator, who often reveals his feelings and thoughts to the reader in framed narratives. For example, Andy's feeling of angst towards life, his deep friendships, as well as any romantic relationships, are disguised by his story about the protagonist Edward who has to leave his magical room for the first time in ten years and find himself in an 'ugly/lovely world' called the Big City (*GX* 51).

Andy's framed narrative already indicates some aspects of the three protagonists' lack of responsibility. In the first chapter, the reader realises that Andy, Clair and Dag's refusal to be part of the bourgeoisie is not because they want to detach themselves from materialistic and superficial lifestyles. Rather, the three want to avoid growing up and taking responsibility for their lives. In search of their true identity and a higher meaning to life, they refuse to take demanding jobs, pay steady rent and establish serious relationships. Coming from wealthy middle–class families, they get by with 'McJobs' (*GX* 5) and call themselves members of the 'Poverty Jet Set' (*GX* 6). Driven by the desire to find their real roots, they believe that they suffer from a condition of 'Terminal Wanderlust' (*GX* 171). These oxymoronic terms reveal the contradiction between the anti–mainstream, anti–consumerist attitude they claim to have and the realisation that all these semi–alternative conditions are driven by materialistic boredom and only with the help of money. This is particularly evident in Clair's character. She leaves her

affluent family in order to 'empty her brains, read books and be with people who wanted to do the same things' (*GX* 36). On the one hand, she claims to have a nonchalant attitude towards material things: objects are just a reminder that all we are doing with life 'is collecting objects. And nothing else' (*GX* 11). On the other hand, the interior design in her bungalow reminds the reader of half of the antique collection at the luxury auction house Sotheby's, rather than of the home of an alternatively–living anti–consumerist (*GX* 75).

Another trait that becomes evident in the first chapter is the characters' immense sense of 'Legislated Nostalgia' (*GX* 39–45). As Andy states, 'all things seem to be from hell these days: dates, parties, weather' (*GX* 7). Andy also lives in a bungalow that looks like it belongs to a pair of 'Eisenhower era Allentown, Pennsylvania newlyweds' (*GX* 85).

In the second chapter the social relationships of the protagonists are depicted in depth by introducing some minor characters: Clair's boyfriend Tobias, Clair's best friend Elvissa, and Andy's little brother, Tyler. These three characters stand in contrast to the three Generation X–ers. Tobias represents the yuppie who 'has one of those bankish money jobs' (*GX* 80), and he admits that he likes his job, the hours, the battling for money and status tokens (*GX* 159). Elvissa is Tobias' opposite, as her choice to live as a gardener in a nunnery (*GX* 119) reveals her true intentions of a non–materialistic and truly alternative lifestyle. What she has in common with Tobias, though, is her genuine choice to live the lifestyle that she wants. Living very poor is just as challenging as becoming very rich. That is why they are the actual heroes of the story as they stay true to their ideals and do not blame anyone else for their life choices.

'Prince Tyler of Portland', as Andy calls his younger brother (*GX* 105), belongs to the generation born after Generation X, called the Global Teens. What distinguishes the Global Teens from the Generation X–ers is that Global Teens are driven by the ambition to be successful and have it all. Their attitude is best described in Tyler's statement, 'Why work as a grocery store box boy when you can own the entire store?' (*GX* 106).

Coupland labels the members of this group 'Generation Y' in his sequel novel *Shampoo Planet* (1992). Their main characteristics are their optimism towards the future, their sense of ambition and their perkiness (*GX* 138). The juxtaposition between the minor characters Tobias, Elvissa and Tyler and the protagonists helps reveal the protagonists' personalities in depth. Clair's relationship with her boyfriend Tobias, whom she calls 'The Walking Orgasm' (*GX* 110) reveals her

superficiality, as the only reason she is with him is his handsome appearance, which she does not bother to deny (*GX* 156). Dag's inability to take any kind of responsibility is reflected in his work attitude: he quits his job in advertising claiming that the thought of still doing his job caught in a VDT[4] another two years down the road would be too depressing (*GX* 23). But the reason why he actually quits his job is because he could not stand the fact that his 'trailer–park bleached perm' (*GX* 24) female co–worker beats him in his own cleverly made (so he thinks) question game. It is his insulted ego and his feeling of embarrassment that make him quit his job and 'never bother to come back' (*GX* 25). His new 'occupational slumming' (*GX* 113) type of profession as a bartender is very convenient, as this undemanding job serves better his 'personal agenda of cocktail consumption' (*GX* 164), an activity that does not require much responsibility, nor any sense of duty. Andy is in a constant state of denial, trying to 'de–complicate' his life (*GX* 77), driven by the desire for 'lessness' (*GX* 59). When Tyler confides his feelings of angst and loneliness to Andy, the latter ignores the feelings of his little brother (*GX* 150). Andy silences his guilty conscience by convincing himself that Tyler's 'earlier outburst is over and will never, I am quite confident, ever be alluded to again' (*GX* 151).

In Chapter Three, the personalities of the three main characters gradually mature. Each and every one of them gains at some point a moment where they stop, reflect and realise: 'Back to real life. Time to get snappy. Time to get a life. But it's hard. Realization. Preparation. Determination. Confession' (*GX* 171). This realisation eventually leads them to reach their quest for personal freedom and inner truth.

The last passage of the novel has divine and sublime elements. It depicts Andy near burning fields at the Mexican border witnessing a mushroom shaped cloud caused by a thermonuclear bomb appearing at the horizon (*GX* 175–76). The final, concluding passage contains numerous biblical references, with Andy standing on a hill, watching the apocalyptic scenery of the destructive cloud coating the entire field. But there is nevertheless a note of hope, in the form of a white egret circling over Andy and his co–spectators, making them feel like the chosen people at that accelerated moment (*GX* 178). Perhaps for the first time in Andy's life he is able to experience something of the depth and truth he has been searching after for thirty years, as he experiences 'a crush of love' (*GX* 179) from the people around him, the kind of experience he has never known before.

From *Generation X* to *Happiness*^{TM}

Over a decade after Coupland's novel entered western popular culture, Canadian author Will Ferguson launched his debut novel *Happiness™*. The title of the book (which was originally *Generica*) refers to the happy–hunting, superficial and pseudo–alternative New Age hype that is dominant in North American culture. The main narrative is about the tremendous impact which a self–help book, *What I Learned On The Mountain*, by the mysterious author Tupak Soiree, has on the entire population of North America. Soiree's book becomes an instant success and turns almost the entire population into a happily smiling Brady Bunch family. Furthermore, the book's impact on people's minds turns out to be so powerful that it quenches people's desire to participate in consumer society altogether. Subordinated to the critically satirised narrative of the money–greedy, pseudo–alternative society, there is a subplot that deals with the struggling dynamics between the matured Generation X–ers and the still powerful and dominant Baby Boomers.

Narrated in the third person, *Happiness™* is a satire using elements of parody, burlesque and exaggerated language. This exaggeration is especially apparent in the description of the protagonist, Edwin de Valu, a publishing editor at Panderics Inc., and of his co–workers, May Weatherhill, Nigel Simms and their boss, Léon Mead. Edwin is a well–dressed but hopelessly skinny man, who looks like the 'before picture in a vintage Charles Atlas comic–book ad' (*HTM* 19). May is described as being made of beautiful and breakable porcelain, with skin pale to the point of anemic, and with 'existential, hazel eyes' (*HTM* 10). Nigel is depicted as the vain, perky, successful yuppie, who 'shone like a freshly groomed stallion' (*HTM* 18).

The most interesting and cartoonish character is Mr. Mead: the man who exclusively dresses in blue jeans in order to suggest he is still young and hip. Growing a beard in order to compensate for his baldness, he wears his 'thinning grey hair pulled back in a tiny ponytail, like a chihuahua's penis' (*HTM* 24). His description is even more exaggerated by his 'weird octagonal glasses', which he wears in order to show that here was once a man on the cutting–edge of politics, business and life (*HTM* 24).

With these descriptions in mind, the reader already has a vivid image of the main characters, who represent different peer groups. May and Edwin both represent the Generation X–ers who have completed the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Nigel is in the same demographic as May and Edwin, but his ambitions and power–hungry personality classify him as the yuppie in this novel. He seemingly acts

like Mr. Mead's lapdog: '"I'll get right on it Mr. Mead," said Nigel as he furiously scribbled gibberish in his notepad' (*HTM* 29). Mr. Mead again is described as 'a Baby Boomer in the worst sense of the word' (*HTM* 24).

The novel begins by setting out an image of the busy, narrow, noisy and claustrophobic city–life (*HTM* 1) that circles around Grand Avenue, a major street characterised by its architecture of 1920s buildings, and as a place 'where the rain is dirty before it hits the ground' (*HTM* 4). The setting of the plot is in Panderic Inc., a financially sound American publishing house that specialises in non–fiction. It is a place that also encompasses the hopelessness of the young, educated academics who are employed within

> a world where all those people in college English course, who had such promise, such potential ended up: editing grammar, marking up manuscripts and dreaming of the day they would open a window, step outside and fall upwards into the clouds, into that gold rimmed edge at the top of the city, up to higher reaches, where the sunlight reached. (*HTM* 8)

This image also reflects the attitude the peer–group characters May, Nigel and Edwin demonstrate from the very first chapter.

Even though they each have different goals and approaches in life, what connects these characters is their battle with the Baby Boomers. As Nigel eloquently puts it, 'North American Baby Boomers feel superior to everyone; superior to their parents, superior to us. And when it comes to their place in history, they are absolutely humourless' (*HTM* 62).

In the first chapter Edwin is depicted as an anti–hero: his marriage to his wife Jenny, who is a successful online–consultant, is a farce. As it is revealed to the reader through inner monologues, he is resentful of having married her, but is too scared to leave her (*HTM* 47). Rather, he continues pretending to care, serving as Jenny's sex slave (she covers her body with 'Post It' instructions for Edwin to follow) and cheating on her occasionally. Being unfaithful to his wife, Edwin has an affair with May, whose feelings he keeps ignoring (*HTM* 129). When asked why May is always on his side, he assumes that it is because she admires the way he carries himself with such quiet dignity (*HTM* 152). His cowardice is further displayed by his ever–growing list of 'Things That I Try To Avoid' (*HTM* 56), such as leaving his wife, quitting his job or leaving the city, while he constantly repeats: 'I hate my job, I hate this place. I hate my boss' (*HTM* 128). His ignorance develops to the extent that he

becomes immune towards the growing happiness–epidemic spreading in North America.

In the second chapter, however, Edwin gradually evolves from the ignorant coward who thinks he can escape his miserable life to a responsible and mature character. After Edwin comes to the realisation that he has lost everything (meaning his wife, who has left him, his best friend and lover May, his home and all his savings, since Jenny has taken their entire fortune worth $2 million to sacrifice it to her new spiritual leader Tupak Soiree), Edwin decides to take action and responsibility not just for himself but for the entire North American population. He wants to save the world from the self–help hype caused by Tupak Soiree by deciding that 'Tupak Soiree must die; that was the perfect Platonic Ideal, the single forceful idea that formed in the mind of a distraught ex–editor' (*HTM* 247). With this determination of Edwin's the novel continues to the third and last chapter.

Here Edwin turns from an anti–hero to a brave, determined protagonist. Realising that he has outgrown his generation, he defends the reputation of the Generation X–er:

> Once the Xers' lost their sense of humor, they lost everything. They lost the very things that made them better than the Baby Boomers: their ideology–free cynicism, their sense of irony; their brutal honesty. (*HTM* 282)

One quarter of the final chapter consists of a dialogue between generations, represented by former Generation X–er Edwin and the real author of the self–help book, Jack McGreary (known by the pseudonym Tupak Soiree). Edwin puts together all his textbook knowledge and life wisdom, combined with human sensibility, and finally convinces the Pre–Baby Boomer McGreary to write a book entitled *How To Be Miserable*, which eventually saves the entire planet from the happiness mania. Sacrificing his friendship with May, who switches to the competition for a better–paid and more prestigious job, Edwin is depicted in the last passage of *Happiness™* as still being trapped at his old miserable job as editor at Panderics Inc. and still dreaming of escape (*HTM* 332). He has had the courage to fight for a better world, but is not brave enough to change his own little microcosm.

Whether they portray their protagonists as cynical losers, who turn their focus to something meaningful in life, as shown in Coupland's novel, or as ignorant pricks, who go the easy way of avoidance and ignorance just to show bravery in saving an entire nation, as shown in

Ferguson's satire, what both *Generation X* and *Happiness™* have in common is that in both novels Generation X–ers are struggling in a world which is ruled and dominated by the powerful and affluent Baby Boomers. All Generation–X characters feel inhibited and restricted in their abilities by the inconvenient circumstances created by difficult economical times. While both novels depict Generation X–ers in the late twentieth century, the reality of being a Generation X–er in the twenty– first century means chatting to your friends on social network sites like Facebook through your stylish iBook while sitting at Starbucks sipping on your Cafe–Latte Mochaccino with nutmeg and cinnamon, with a dash of sun–dried saffron. It also means graduating with a top–notch university degree that you paid for with a six–digit loan in your bank account, only to realise that the great jobs are not out there waiting for you in line. It is a constant balance between faith and fear, trial and error and the hope that against all odds, dreams eventually do become true.

NOTES

Abbreviations

GX   *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*.
HTM   *Happiness*™.

[1] Other specifications on birth years differ from that of Coupland: according to Poindexter and Lasorsa, for instance, Generation X–ers were born between the years 1965 and 1977.
[2] The scientific term for this kind of condition is 'displaced nostalgia': see Vanderbilt.
[3] Professor Harvey Krahn from the Department of Sociology at the University of Alberta and his team conducted research that started in the 1980s on a group of 900 students from six Edmonton high schools. Krahn's team focused on the effects of youth unemployment amongst Generation X–ers. See 'Generation X Survey'.
[4] VDT stands for 'Veal–Fattening Pen', a term that Coupland uses to refer to a little cubicle that serves as a 'money–saving device for the corporation'. See Coupland's interview by Michael Kinsey.

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