

ANDRZEJ KASPEREK
The University of Silesia

Duane Elgin's concept of the living universe in view of the process of neo-Romanticization

Duane Elgin is an important figure for the movement of voluntary simplicity, if he has become the focus of attention among the representatives of various academic fields studying contemporary society and culture (sociologists, historians of ideas, economists, culture experts or philosophers), then as the *spiritus movens* of the trend defying the imperative of uncontrollable consumption, which is the pillar of development in contemporary societies. Propagating a simpler and more environmentally friendly ideal, which is an alternative to the consumerist society, is nonetheless deeply immersed in Elgin's writings, in a certain way of understanding the universe. In his works, especially in *The Living Universe*, Elgin creates the concept of a living universe, permeated with consciousness and spirituality. In this turn against the idea of a dead universe understood as a mechanism, Elgin continues an esoteric tradition, with its important ideas of organicism, holism or evolutionism.

However, I do not want to focus my attention exclusively on the reconstruction of the esoteric threads in the works of the author of *Voluntary Simplicity*. I would rather like to regard his writings and their influence as an illustration of certain socio-cultural processes, the common denominator of which is “the massive subjective turn of modern culture”¹ with its Romantic roots. In other words: I would like to examine Duane Elgin's works reflected in wider socio-cultural processes, the common feature of which is another wave of the phenomenon more or less described as the neo-Romanticization of the contemporary world, or its re-enchantment. The article is written from a sociological angle (although themes from the field of the history of esoteric ideas are especially noticeable), therefore I would like to direct particular

¹ “The massive subjective turn of modern culture”, cf. Ch. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1991, p. 26. The Polish version was translated by Andrzej Pawelec, cf. Ch. Taylor, *Etyka autentyczności*, Kraków-Warszawa 1996, p. 28.

attention to the relationship between the social change and the popularization of what is underground, "socially invisible" and culturally marginalized.

Edward A. Tiryakian, who is undoubtedly one of the pioneers of the sociological interest in esotericism, treated it as a factor of a cultural shift (cultural and social innovation)². When writing about the occult revival³ in the 1960s and 1970s and proposing a project of practising the sociology of the occult, he disposed of treating the esoteric tradition as an atavistic element of the pre-modern mentality. From the perspective of research on esotericism, its popularization (just like at the close of the times of Rome, the Renaissance, the Reformation, in the *fin de siècle* period or in the times of the youth counterculture) may be regarded as a litmus paper of the revolution of culture. From this vantage point esoteric tradition does not have to be treated as an alternative to modernity, quite the opposite, it may be defined as a significant framework for modern society – Tiryakian even writes about the fact that unearthing esoteric themes in the Renaissance contributed to accepting the category of change and novelty itself⁴. After all, what matters in view of sociological research on esotericism, the sociology of the occult was to become part of the sociology of culture⁵. Therefore, it seems essential to place deliberations on the works of Duane Elgin in perspective of another term important for the reflection on the relationship between contemporary culture and esotericism, namely in perspective of research on occulture. A cluster of two notions ("occultism" and "culture") seems to illustrate best the processes of distribution of the esoteric tradition, which are vital for contemporary society, through the most modern channels of transmission at the disposal of contemporary culture. The topic of occulture was systematically discussed by Christopher Partridge in two volumes of his work *The Re-Enchantment of the West*⁶. The term itself is *de facto* a kind of oxymoron, on the one hand, combining what is hidden, invisible, "illegal" in the meaning of a counterculture, which is contrary to the cultural mainstream, while on the other hand, what is usual and ordinary. The notion of occulture as a sociological term, which is emphasized by Partridge, constitutes a reservoir of ideas, beliefs, practices and symbols, values permeating the process of thinking, symbolizing and

² E. A. Tiryakian, *Toward the Sociology of Esoteric Culture*, in: *On the Margin of the Visible. Sociology, the Esoteric, and the Occult*, E. A. Tiryakian (ed.), New York-London-Sydney-Toronto, 1974, p. 273.

³ Although Tiryakian uses the terms "esotericism" and "occultism" quite colloquially here, it is worth mentioning that he is the author of a popular distinction between the term "occult", which refers to practices and techniques, whereas the term "esoteric" refers to the religious and philosophical system of beliefs, which is the basis for occult techniques and practices (E. A. Tiryakian, *Toward the Sociology of Esoteric Culture...*, op. cit., p. 265).

⁴ Ibid, pp. 268-269.

⁵ Ibid, p. 263.

⁶ Cf. Ch. Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West. Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*, vol. 1, London-New York 2004; Ch. Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West. Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*, vol. 2, London-New York 2005.

also experience⁷. As Partridge points out, post-materialist values, emphasizing the meaning of self-expression, subjectivization and experience⁸ are favourable conditions for the popularization of esotericism. In order for the very concept of occulture to develop, the output of the British sociologist, Colin Campbell, turns out to be especially important. He is the author of the term *cultic milieu*, which is very significant in the history of sociological (but not only sociological) reflection on religion. According to Campbell, *cultic milieu* constitutes a cultural underground of society and includes all deviant systems of beliefs and practices⁹. This cultural underground, existing outside of the mainstream of culture, is created by all systems of beliefs and practices deviant from the dominant cultural order. Hence, heterodoxal religious trends, such as alternative spirituality, alternative medicine or science fall into this category, together with what is connected with the Western esoteric tradition, that is magic, mysticism, (neo-)gnosis, the New Age, holistic spirituality. By polemicizing with the concept of *cultic milieu*, Partridge claims that the term *occultic* defines the contemporary alternative religious environments in a more precise way than *cultic*. However, it is important that Partridge ascribes a very wide meaning to the term *occult*, including what Campbell understood within the notion of cultural underground, but at the same time the deviance (counterculturalism) of ideas within occulture is becoming blunted. Analogically to the term popular culture, Partridge uses the term popular occulture. The key to understanding what Partridge defined as the *occult revival* turns out to be a phenomenon of popular culture broadcasted by the mass media. The esoteric tradition (Western and Eastern), by spreading to the main trend of culture (cultural mainstream), although preserving its underground roots, ceases to be countercultural and deviant in the full sense of the word¹⁰. It becomes, as Partridge called it, ordinary.

Colin Campbell's writings are yet another point of reference in the concept of occulture. Namely, Campbell put forward a suggestion to describe contemporary Western culture in terms of its Easternization (*Easternization of the West*)¹¹ more than 25

⁷ Ch. Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West. Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*, vol. 1..., op. cit., p. 187.

⁸ Idem, *Occulture is Ordinary*, in: *Contemporary Esotericism*, E. Asprem, K. Granholm (ed.), Lancaster – Bristol 2013, p. 115.

⁹ C. Campbell, *The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization*, "A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain", 1972, no. 5, p. 122.

¹⁰ The problem of the popularization of what is underground in contemporary societies was the focus of my attention in the book *Wolność spod znaku undergroundu. Duchowość (po)nowoczesna w perspektywie hermeneutyki kultury i socjologii religii*, Kraków 2012. An interesting study of the phenomenon of an increase in popularity of the rejected knowledge (and at the same time its trivialization), knowledge stigmatized by popular culture was presented by Michael Barkun (cf. M. Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Berkeley 2003).

¹¹ As far as I know, Campbell presented his concept of the Easternization of the West for the first time in his work from 1998 (cf. C. Campbell, *The Easternization of the West: Reflections on a New Theodicy for a New Millennium*, in: *The Ethics of the Future*, E. R. Laretta (ed.), Geneva 1998, pp. 286-312). Partridge polemicises

years later than the concept of *cultic milieu*. Campbell goes against the tide of the dominant presentation of the relationship between occidentalization of the world (the notions of globalization or Americanization are synonyms here) and the Orientalization of the West. According to him, the fact that the non-Western world adopts the world of values and institutions from the West, whereas something exactly opposite happens in the West itself, is completely ignored¹². Martial arts, feng-shui, alternative medicine, yoga, massage, Eastern religions: Buddhism or Hinduism enjoy great popularity here. As Campbell points out, it is highly probable that exactly when the rest of the world imitates the West, it abandons its roots, fascinated by the otherness.

The core of Partridge's dispute over Campbell's thesis on the Easternization of the West is the conviction of the former that we are dealing here with the process of neo-Romanticization of the contemporary West, while the turn towards the East should be treated as part of a wider phenomenon (neo-Romanticization), which can be understood in terms of *occulture*¹³. It was in the times of Romanticism that the culture of the Orient was discovered in the West on such a large scale for the first time. First translations appeared as well as a study of the Orient. However, Partridge directs his attention to the fact that Romantics (e.g. Herder or Hegel) treated the culture of the Orient as "inspirational articulations of *their own* ideas"¹⁴ and not as a reservoir of original ideas, which could radically change the notional systems of the Western world. Romantics just discovered in the Orient something which was already present in the West. According to Partridge, a more noticeable turn towards the Orient is connected with the activity of the Theosophical Society, although also in this case ideas developed by the Society, especially evolutionism, are in the nature of the West indeed. Another waves of Romantic inspirations (modernism or the youth counterculture from the 1960s and 1970s) connected with fascination with the Orient will not change one thing: despite the import of ideas, what remains *differentiae specifica*e of the West is activism, affirmation and the ideology of progress. Resignation and fatalism are rarely inscribed in Western, alternative outlooks on life¹⁵.

with Campbell's theses included in his study written a year later – *The Easternization of the West*, in: *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, B. Wilson, J. Cresswell (ed.), London 1999, pp. 35-48. In my article I will refer to Campbell's book *The Easternization of the West. A Thematic Account of Cultural Change in the Modern Era*, Boulder-London 2007. I will translate the term *Easternization* into Polish as "Orientalization". In the Polish language the terms "Easternization" and "Westernization" exist, but I do not think that promoting them instead of the terms "Orientalization" and "occidentalization" would contribute anything new.

¹² C. Campbell, *The Easternization of the West. A Thematic Account of Cultural Change in the Modern Era...*, op. cit., p. 19.

¹³ Ch. Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West. Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*, vol 1..., op. cit., p. 89.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

Romanticism was a groundbreaking period in the history of Western culture for many reasons. In this very time the idea of authenticity was formulated and popularized, the Western esoteric tradition was re-interpreted and the cognitive pre-eminence of reason was questioned. Romanticism turned out to be also a groundbreaking time in the history of the ecological movement, it was then that the process of *eco-enchantment* was taking place, which accompanied the Romantic re-enchantment, as a reaction to the process of creating a modern iron cage for effectiveness. Of course, Romantics were not the first in their turn to nature, in their criticism of the mechanistic model of the world. They were not the first to discover the presence of consciousness in nature. However, on account of the extent of changes, the advancement of the process of re-enchantment of nature and alienation of a human being from its order, a Romantic answer had to be effectual enough to gain the power of influence on the appearing 19th century, modern mentality.

By taking a stand against 1) the re-enchanted concept of the world, 2) striving after its quantification, 3) the mechanization of the world, 4) rationalist abstraction, 5) the breakdown of social bonds (criticism of egotism and individualism)¹⁶, Romantics rejected this model of modernity, which isolated human beings from their own inner life, from each other and from the world of nature¹⁷. Overcoming a threefold alienation accompanied consecutive waves of neo-Romanticization of the world, while the concept of a living universe suggested by Duane Elgin has become part of this trend of criticism of the alienating power of modernity. Although the fascination with the East is clearly visible in his works¹⁸, it should also be added that in his optimism, committed attitude and the vision of sustainable social development, Elgin remains with no doubt the child of the West. The movement of voluntary simplicity, which he is so identified with, derives from the Romantic heritage, especially from the output of the representatives of the circle of the American Transcendentalists¹⁹.

Whether in the United States of America or in Europe, the re-interpretation as well as popularization of the traditional Western esoteric thought was the *novum*, which Romanticism brought. The representatives of Bohemianism, which was born back then, namely such poets as William Blake or Ralph Waldo Emerson²⁰, and Adam

¹⁶ R. Sayre, M. Löwy, *Romanticism and Capitalism*, in: *A Companion to European Romanticism*, M. Ferber (ed.), Oxford 2005, pp. 436-439.

¹⁷ Ch. Taylor, *Etyka autentyczności...*, op. cit., p. 76.

¹⁸ Elgin himself admits that he practices e.g. meditation or Zen Buddhism.

¹⁹ David E. Shi in his work devoted to the history of the idea of simplicity in the history of the United States of America directs our attention to the reinterpretation of this idea in the times of Romanticism. It was justified in the classical philosophy and Protestant tradition up to the times of Romanticism. By treating nature as a source of aesthetic pleasure, morality and spiritual inspiration, Romantics re-interpreted not only nature itself, but they also attached a new meaning to simplicity itself (D. E. Shi, *The Simple Life. Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture*, New York – Oxford 1985, p. 127).

²⁰ Cf. S. Ruston, *Shelley and Vitality*, London-New York 2005, on the issues of vitality and life in the output of another Romantic poet, Percy Shelley.

Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki or Zygmunt Krasiński in Poland, came into contact with the esoteric tradition, which also spread to the writings of philosophers connected with the Romantic ideology (first and foremost, the German idealism needs to be mentioned here, especially the works of Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling, or the aforementioned American Transcendentalism). Before characterizing the concept of a living universe by Elgin, I would like to emphasize this esoteric aspect of the Romantic world. In his study on the issue of connections between Romanticism and the esoteric tradition, Wouter J. Hanegraaff enumerates three main categories of Romanticism: 1) organicism, 2) imagination, 3) temporalism²¹. These categories – as he points out – at the same time need to be regarded as crucial for the esoteric tradition²². In his text from 1941, *The Meaning of Romanticism for the Historian of Ideas*, Arthur O. Lovejoy singled out three criteria of Romanticism: organicism (holism), dynamism and diversity²³. As Wouter Hanegraaff points out, Lovejoy's characterization of Romanticism may *de facto* come down to two ideas: diversitarian holism and Romantic evolutionism²⁴. However, René Wellek regarded three ideas (imagination, nature, symbols and myths) as the characteristic features of Romanticism (English, French and German)²⁵. In 1951 Morse Peckham made an attempt to bring together the positions of Lovejoy and Wellek. According to him, the two authors are connected by a common metaphor: dynamic organicism²⁶. Peckham noticed that whether it concerned philosophy, theology or aesthetics, Romanticism was characterised by swinging away from the mechanistic statics in the spirit of Newton towards thinking in terms of dynamic organicism, where the categories of change, growth, diversity, creative imagination and unconsciousness gained significance²⁷.

Although every aspect of Romanticism enumerated by Hanegraaff is also present in Elgin's works, I would especially like to emphasize the organic thread in this article. As I have already mentioned, I would like to treat the analysis of Elgin's writings as an exemplification of certain socio-cultural processes, which may be defined by the common term of neo-Romanticization.

²¹ W. J. Hanegraaff, *Romanticism and the Esoteric Connection*, in: *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times*, R. van den Broek, W. J. Hanegraaff (ed.), Albany, NY 1998, p. 256.

²² Here Hanegraaff refers to theses put forward by Antoine Faivre. Apart from the mentioned three categories, Faivre characterizes esoterism through the ideas of correspondence, perennial philosophy as well as transmission of knowledge (A. Faivre, *Renaissance Hermeticism and the Concept of Western Esotericism*, in: *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times...*, op. cit., pp. 119-120; See also A. Faivre, *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition. Studies in Western Esotericism*, Albany, N.Y 2000, pp. XXI-XXIV).

²³ A. O. Lovejoy, *The Meaning of Romanticism for the Historian of Ideas*, "Journal of the History of Ideas" 1941, vol. II, no. 3, p. 272.

²⁴ W. J. Hanegraaff, *Romanticism and the Esoteric Connection...*, op. cit., p. 242.

²⁵ R. Wellek, *The Concept of Romanticism in Literary History*, in: *Romanticism: Points of View*, R. F. Gleckner, G. E. Enscoe (ed.), Detroit-Michigan 1974, p. 193.

²⁶ M. Peckham, *Toward a Theory of Romanticism*, in: *Romanticism: Points of View...*, op. cit., p. 238.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

Duane Elgin's best-known book remains *Voluntary Simplicity*, published for the first time in 1981. It is there that he repeats the most important values, formulated in the article from 1978 (Duane Elgin wrote it with Arnold Mitchell), which are fundamental to the idea of voluntary simplicity: 1) material simplicity, 2) human scale (which refers to the famous expression *Small is Beautiful* by Ernst F. Schumacher), 3) self-determination, 4) ecological awareness, 5) personal development²⁸. In *Changing Images of Man*, a work published in 1982 under the auspices of Stanford Research Institute (SRI), he presents an outlook on life based on a dissent from the mechanistic vision of the world as well as the apologia for the notion of life²⁹. In his work *The Living Universe*, published in 2010, he depicts the ideas of the movement of voluntary simplicity in the concept of a living universe, glorifying organicism. In his writings, especially in *The Living Universe*, Elgin builds a concept of a living universe, permeated with consciousness and spirituality. Importantly, his deliberations begin with an introduction by Deepak Chopra, regarded as one of the most prominent figures of the New Age³⁰. Elgin supports striving for the non-material with the ontological concept of a living universe, while he puts the choice between consumerism and conscious simplicity in perspective of a dispute between the concept of a dead universe and a living universe. As long as materialism, and as a result collecting things and deriving pleasure from owning them, seems to be a rational answer to the conviction of the existence of a dead universe, the perspective of existing in a living universe, opens to minimizing the excess of material things, accumulating non-material riches: relations with people, caring for the community, creative expression³¹. Elgin criticizes the contemporary individualism understood in terms of egotism, associated with breaking social bonds and the atomization of social life, by creating a concept of society based on mutual cooperation and affection. Hence the result of the conviction of the existence of a living universe would be the concern not only for your own well-being, but also for the well-being of others³². The praise of kindness and compassion is rooted in here. The aforementioned Romantic criticism of the threefold alienation of a modern human

²⁸ D. Elgin, A. Mitchell, *Voluntary Simplicity: A Movement Emerges*, in: *Voluntary Simplicity. Responding to Consumer Culture*, D. Doherty, A. Etzioni (ed.), Oxford 2003, pp. 147-152.

²⁹ Cf. *Changing Images of Man*, O. W. Markley, W. W. Harman (ed.), Oxford-New York-Toronto-Sydney-Paris-Frankfurt, pp. 45-64. Although the work *Changing Images of Man* is a study created by a team of researchers, the authorship of two chapters: *Economic Man: Servant to Industrial Metaphors* as well as *Societal Choices and Consequences of Changing Images* should be above all attributed to Elgin. It is worth mentioning that one of the team members was also Joseph Campbell.

³⁰ In turn, Massimo Introvigne enlists Deepak Chopra as one of the most important representatives of the Next Age (M. Introvigne, *After the New Age: Is There a Next Age?*, in: *New Age Religion and Globalization*, Mikael Rothstein (ed.), Aarhus 2001, p. 64.

³¹ D. Elgin, *The Living Universe. Where are we? Who are we? Where are we going?* San Francisco 2009, pp. 13-14.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

being, living in an iron cage of effectiveness, finds its legitimization in the concept of a living universe.

Deepak Chopra notices a holistic perspective in Elgin's *The Living Universe*, where people are an integral part of the living and intelligent universe³³. Such a holistic perspective seems to be a permanent element of the contemporary pop occulture. Of course, by referring to Campbell's category of Easternization, we can assume that it is the result of a clash of two different traditions, justified in religious and spiritual systems. By polemicizing with the advocates of the mechanistic model of the universe, from which the so-called "irrational experience" was eliminated, Elgin refers to the model of a human being as the Master, as a creature ruling over nature³⁴. According to Elgin, this picture of a human being derives from the Judaeo-Christian tradition³⁵, while he considers Christianity itself to be the most anthropocentric religion of the world, which legitimizes the dualism of nature and a human being. Neo-Romanticization, eco-enchantment or the Orientalization of the West are the terms, which are undoubtedly joined by one thing: turning the attention to weakening the human-nature dichotomy as well as the rising popularity of a more holistic understanding of a human being (body and soul), but also a more holistic understanding of the relation between humans and nature. James Cameron's film *Avatar* perfectly illustrates the process of such reinterpretation on the level of pop-culture and occulture³⁶. This film can even be treated as a model occultural product, in which the suggestion of a holistic understanding of the relation between man and nature (or more widely: universe) appears, but also the relation between human beings and other creatures (conscious beings). *Avatar*, which becomes part of the ecological debate on treating the world subserviently and includes the polemics with, as Elgin would have said, Christian anthropocentrism, can also be treated as an echo of criticism of the materialistic attitude, where "owning has become a value". In his study on the economic view of human beings, Elgin wrote that only the Western civilization, permeated with the Promethean myth, emphasized what could be instead of what is. He added that none other civilization had subordinated the world to its own will to a comparable extent³⁷. *Avatar's* plot, based on the confrontation of two worlds: the human one, characterized by greed and the one where representatives of the NA'vi race live, i.e. the world permeated with respect for life, introduces the viewer to the bottom of the philosophical dispute, which has its socio-cultural, economic or just existential consequences for people's lives. Greed, ingrained in the economic model of

³³ D. Chopra, *Foreword*, in: D. Elgin, *The Living Universe. Where are we? Who are we? Where are we going?...*, op. cit., pp. IX-X.

³⁴ *Changing Images of Man...*, op. cit., p. 47.

³⁵ It is not the subject of this study to resolve whether such explicit Elgin's viewpoint is justified.

³⁶ I would like to thank my student Jakub Mike for turning my attention to the ecological aspect of the film *Avatar*.

³⁷ *Changing Images of Man...*, op. cit., p. 48.

a human being – alienating contemporary persons from themselves, from each other and finally from nature – corresponds with the vision of a dead universe.

In the *Introduction* to Elgin's book, Deepak Chopra directs his attention to another characteristic feature of the works by the author of *Voluntary Simplicity*. According to Chopra, Elgin combines both attitudes at the same time: the researcher of scientific knowledge and spiritual understanding³⁸. An attempt to integrate those two perspectives is visible in Elgin's writings from the very start, as he began his activity at the Stanford Research Institute think tank, where he worked on studies concerning the future, making predictions of a sustainable social development. Here also an "unorthodox" approach to science is visible, according to which the statement that atoms have no consciousness, while love and happiness are chemical processes³⁹, do not have to be the final word for contemporary science. According to Elgin, the awareness that we are part of a living universe belongs to the sapiential tradition, propagated for centuries by people living in various places around the world. Also Western thought is an integral part of the "wisdom of the world"⁴⁰. Views expressed by Heraclitus, Plotinus, Giordano Bruno, Schelling, Hegel or Bergson make up the Western tradition of thinking about a living universe. Only the last centuries, emphasizing the honourable position of a human being, have changed the very concept of the universe, considering it from the scientific viewpoint. As Elgin claims, a shift in the paradigm of doing research, which allows us to notice the purpose and mysticism of nature, is taking place before our eyes. The very definition of life and consciousness is changing. According to him, a certain level of consciousness is essential to live, primary perception is supposed to be the foundation of the universe. We can notice a certain degree of consciousness already on the level of atoms, bacteria, plants or animals, although it is not the same understanding of consciousness that we associate with human consciousness. On the one hand, Elgin's concept resembles the study of perception from Leibniz's *Monadology*, while on the other hand – Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's concept of noosphere. Just like the monad reflects the whole universe, we all have a connection with the universe⁴¹. We have the ability to go beyond physical senses with our consciousness, connected with the whole universe⁴². According to Elgin, until recently we have thought that we are only physical creatures, but today we gain more and more information about the fact that we are cosmic beings, who are part of the process of continual recreation of the universe⁴³.

³⁸ D. Chopra, *Foreword...*, op. cit., p. IX.

³⁹ D. Elgin, *The Living Universe. Where are we? Who are we? Where are we going?...*, op. cit., p. 9.

⁴⁰ The issue of the ecology of light is an interesting topic approached by Elgin, who (cursorily) reconstructs the semantics of light in the culture of the West and the East and in this way draws our attention to the significance of the very notions of the Enlightenment, the in-visible and the trans-visible. He refers to Grzegorz Palmas, who emphasized the relationship between light and gnosis.

⁴¹ Here we are dealing with the idea of correspondence, which Faivre regards as an esoteric idea.

⁴² D. Elgin, *The Living Universe. Where are we? Who are we? Where are we going?...*, op. cit., p. 51.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

Elgin's concept of a living universe is based on the idea of evolution. Evolutionism is an old esoteric belief, which can be found in Orfism, where it appeared in the form of the myth of the fall. This myth is also present in Gnosticism, Neoplatonism or Kabbalah and the conviction of imperfection and incompleteness of humankind is what connects those intellectual and religious traditions. A human being, who originally belonged to the divine reality, falls (into sin, matter), the esoteric knowledge (Gnosis as the real knowledge), which provides a true understanding of the history of the Creation and the nature of humanity is to allow people to return to this originally divine state⁴⁴. The Romantic concept of evolution, which has esoteric roots, but is based on temporalization, i.e. the idea of being time-bound, was founded on the myth of the fall and rebirth, although contrary to Plotinus's or Gnostics' scheme, the growing diversification was not equated with evil, but at the same time the belief that the final state will be more perfect than the initial state of the process of evolution was connected with what is yet to come (unity and harmony). This optimistic concept of evolution, based on the idea of progress, is also present in Elgin's works. As he points out, its aim is not pacing from matter to consciousness, but the integration of matter and consciousness⁴⁵. Elgin includes his evolution scheme in James Campbell's imagery of a journey (he writes that here we can speak of the archetype of a human journey), made up of the stage of separation and returning home. Completing such a journey, being a specific cultural invariant, becomes a process of inner discovery and transformation⁴⁶, in which the character undergoes initiation and experiences awakening. The greatest challenge he faces is to kill the dragon of *ego*, which would allow him to discover communion with the living universe⁴⁷.

Elgin is trying to depict the metaphor of a human journey in the history of Western societies, interpreting the Industrial Revolution in terms of separation from the living universe, from other people and finally from the spirituality of life⁴⁸. Importantly, in his understanding of evolution, the Industrial Revolution and its negative consequences are not any aberrations on the road of the evolution of consciousness, but are its key element: without separation there would be no return and awakening. Elgin writes that currently we are half way back home, more mature, put to the supreme test. The scope of changes, deep transformation make us go beyond

⁴⁴ J. Iwersen, *The Epistemological Foundations of Esoteric Thought and Practice*. "Journal of Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies", 2007, vol. 3, p. 14. Available from <http://www.asanas.org.uk/files/jasanas003.pdf>. [retrieved on: 30.03.2012].

⁴⁵ D. Elgin, *The Living Universe. Where are we? Who are we? Where are we going?...*, op. cit., p. 126.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 138. In his interpretation of the Industrial Revolution, as can be seen, Elgin remains thoroughly Romantic, while areas of separation emphasized by him coincide with the areas of alienation, the existence of which Romantics pointed to.

individual awakening and start thinking in terms of a collective awakening⁴⁹. The approaching new era will be a time of worldwide reconciliation between people in various aspects of life (gender, race, nation or faith), but also a reconciliation of human beings with nature. The approaching era will be a time of integration between opposites, unity and multitude, femininity and masculinity⁵⁰, wealth and poverty or what is transcendent and immanent⁵¹.

The planetary transformation is based on the concept of collective consciousness (Elgin writes also about collective imagination). Discussions over the issues of collective consciousness were especially animated in sociology at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, they were connected first of all with the figure of Émile Durkheim⁵². However, by exploring the issue of collective consciousness, Elgin refers to other traditions, grounding it on Carl Gustav Jung's concept of the collective unconscious⁵³, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionistic perspective on the collective consciousness or Ken Wilber's concept of consciousness. He is also trying to found his concept of collective consciousness on scientific discoveries, while he clearly emphasizes that in the traditional science (he uses such an expression) the idea of collective consciousness is not possible⁵⁴. Even a hundred years ago – he writes – science offered a static model of the universe, today it is discovering its mysteriousness and dynamism, noticing integrity in it, part of which is a human being⁵⁵. In Elgin's interpretation of the collective consciousness, which clearly distinguishes it from the sociological approach to the issue, this phenomenon is not restricted to people, but resembles a "connective tissue of the cosmos"⁵⁶. The collective consciousness evolves, going through consecutive stages, which lead to achieving maturity by civilization itself⁵⁷. This model

⁴⁹ The future age, heralded by Elgin, in many ways resembles *The Aquarian Conspiracy* by Marilyn Ferguson (cf. M. Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy. Personal and Social Transformation in Our Time*, New York 2009, p. 86).

⁵⁰ Elgin especially emphasizes the significance of a feminine element, by writing: "We are She". He also uses the expression *The Mother Universe*.

⁵¹ D. Elgin, *The Living Universe. Where are we? Who are we? Where are we going?...*, op. cit., p. 143.

⁵² On the subject of Durkheim's collective consciousness cf. A. Kasperek, *Świadomość zbiorowa*, in: *Formy świadomości społecznej*, K. Sztalt, M. Zemło (ed.), Lublin 2014, pp. 45-67.

⁵³ When it comes to Jung's works, Elgin often uses the notion of an archetype.

⁵⁴ I think that in his arguments Elgin limits scientific deliberations to natural sciences, although he does not write anywhere about such a decision. Moreover, he is interested in undergoing research whereby consciousness is interpreted from the reductionist and mechanistic perspective (D. Elgin with C. LeDrew, *Global Consciousness Change: Indicators of an Emerging Paradigm*, San Anselmo 1997, p. 5. Available from: http://www.duaneelgin.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/global_consciousness.pdf [retrieved on: 15.06.2015]).

⁵⁵ D. Elgin, *Collective Consciousness and Cultural Healing*, San Anselmo 1997, p. 7. Available from: http://duaneelgin.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/collective_consciousness.pdf [retrieved on: 15.06.2015].

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7. Such an approach seems to be closest to the concept of noosphere by Teilhard de Chardin.

⁵⁷ Elgin distinguishes between two phases of evolution of consciousness, each of the phases consists of three stages. The first phase, which is the domain of the collective unconscious, consists of: the hunter-gatherer era (collective consciousness focused on the senses), the agrarian era (collective consciousness focused on

of evolution of the collective consciousness – as Elgin points out – coincides with stages of human development differentiated by Western psychology on the one hand, and with Eastern meditative traditions on the other hand⁵⁸. Inspiration with the Eastern meditative tradition is clearly visible when Elgin *de facto* equates collective consciousness with mindfulness⁵⁹. This approach to development, clearly inspired by Zen Buddhism⁶⁰, is accompanied by emphasizing the significance of such qualities as empathy, kindness, sympathy and hope for the development of civilization⁶¹. In his works Elgin – as he writes himself – expands the Buddhist concept of the factors of enlightenment and applies them with regard to community. An aware, reflective community consists of the following qualities: 1) self-determination, 2) admitting its own mistakes, 3) non-attachment, 4) inclusiveness, 5) anticipation, 6) creativity⁶².

I think that a short presentation of Elgin's description of the emergence of a new paradigm will sum up best his concept of a living universe, although I do not mean Kuhn's understanding of the paradigm itself, which refers to science. For Elgin, shifting towards a new paradigm is equal with achieving another stage of development by the collective consciousness, the consequence of which are changes in civilization, while science is only one part of a wide spectrum of changes. The axis of Elgin's suggestions is shifting from the industrial/materialistic paradigm to the reflective/living systems paradigm. The following table compares differences between the paradigms:

feelings) as well as the industrial era (collective consciousness focused on thinking). The second phase, which is the domain of collective consciousness, consists of the communications era (reflective consciousness), the restoration era (corresponding to the "oceanic" collective consciousness) and the surpassing era (where the collective consciousness becomes the flow consciousness) (Ibid., p. 12). See also: D. Elgin, *Awakening Earth: Exploring the Evolution of Human Culture and Consciousness*, New York 1993.

⁵⁸ Elgin especially emphasizes being inspired by the writings of the following authors: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Ken Wilber, Jean Gebser, Abraham Maslow (D. Elgin, *Collective Consciousness and Cultural Healing...*, op. cit., p. 11).

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 12. Reflection on mindfulness matters greatly in the environment of voluntary simplicity (cf. M. A. Burch, *Mindfulness: The Doorway to Simple Living*, Simplicity Institute 2012, p. 2. Available from: <http://simplicityinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/MindfulnessSimplicityInstitute.pdf> [retrieved on: 15.06.2015])

⁶⁰ Cf. T. Nhat Hanh, *Cud uważności. Zen w sztuce codziennego życia: prosty podręcznik medytacji*, translated into Polish by G. Draheim, Warszawa 1992.

⁶¹ These qualities also made up what Dalai Lama describes as "basic spirituality" (H. H. Dalai Lama, H. C. Cutler, MD, *The Art of Happiness. A Handbook For Living*, London 1998, p. 258).

⁶² D. Elgin, *Collective Consciousness and Cultural Healing...*, op. cit., p. 19.

Industrial / materialistic paradigm	Reflective / living-systems paradigm
The cosmos mostly consists of dead matter and empty space; it is not alive	The cosmos is a unique kind of living organism and is alive as a system
It is difficult to find meaning and purpose in most forms of life	The cosmos constitutes a unified system, where everything matters
Consciousness is a biochemical product, localized in the brain	Consciousness is a capacity which permeates the universe
The aim of life is material success and achievements	The aim of life is a development of harmonious relations between our inner life and what is outside in order to live in a more balanced and compassionate way
Uncontrollable consumption dominates. The "good life" is interpreted in terms of having money for which you can buy access to pleasure and avoid what discomforts you	Conscious consumption is emphasized. The "good life" is based on searching balance between what is inner and outer, material and spiritual, personal and social, etc.
Identity is defined in terms of owning material possessions and having a social standing	Our sense of self develops due to a conscious, full of love and creative participation in life
Autonomy and mobility are emphasized	Personal development and community are emphasized
An entity is defined in terms of having a body, it is separated from the rest and alone	An entity is both a special and integral part of the universe. Our presence is not restricted to our physical existence
Using resources devoid of life for progress	Respect for all life, because everything is part of the body of life
Fierce competition is the norm (competing against the others)	Fair competition is the norm (cooperating with others)

Source: D. Elgin with C. LeDrew, *Global Consciousness Change: Indicators of an Emerging Paradigm...*, op. cit., p. 5.

The reflective paradigm, which is a collection of ideas concerning the universe, nature, society or human beings, at the same time presents Elgin's notions on the subject of physics, biology, sociology or psychology (and other sciences I have not mentioned). The concept of a living, dynamic universe, permeated with consciousness, organizes this holistic paradigm, which is a good example of the process of neo-Romanticization of the world, previously characterized in this article. Eco-enchantment, the advocate of which Elgin remains from the very beginning of his activity, constitutes a foundation and inspiration for this paradigm. In this article I examined only one, organistic spectrum of the neo-Romantic outlook on life, leaving other, less important threads, outside of my field of interest – above all, imagination and temporalism. Finally, I would like to turn my attention to the fact that Elgin's works and activity, reflecting wider social processes, are a factor of social change, which has achieved its most mature expression in the movement of voluntary simplicity. In the foreword to a new edition of his book *Voluntary Simplicity* from 2010 (first edition: 1981), Duane Elgin directed our attention to the growing interest over the last thirty years in the idea of a more sustainable, environmentally friendly life, the

idea propagated by protagonists of voluntary simplicity. This idea entered from the periphery to the cultural mainstream of contemporary society⁶³.

⁶³ D. Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity. Toward a Way of Life that is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich*, second edition, New York 2010, pp. XXV-XXVII.