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THE ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN “ADJUSTMENT DAY”  
BY CH. PALAHNIUK

Chuck Palahniuk’s popularity is based on his piece of transgressive prose named “The Fight Club” (1996) which was followed by sixteen more novels, two documentaries and a number of short stories. His novels are hard to be neutral to: widely-known are the episodes of the public readings of his stories where people in large numbers lost consciousness because of what they heard. According to the feedback given by “The Independent”, *people fainted most where they also laughed a lot* [1]. His prose is full of controversy and has gained significant attention from literary critics around the world. Among the Russian researches of his art are: V. B. Shamina, N. S. Bochkareva, E. R. Chemezova. R.A. Semchenko is the author of a PhD dissertation devoted to the individual style of the writer, and the contemporary researcher A. I. Zholud from Kazan presented the prose by Palahniuk as a part of mass culture. In her article his writing style is characterized as *simple, but dynamic enough to be able to compete with modern audio-visual forms of entertainment* [2, c. 236]. The trend among the latter is that they are becoming more and more interactive. City journalism is prospering, amateur anchors can broadcast news, everyone is able to edit Wikipedia. The same tendency is traceable in Palahniuk’s prose: from essays and classically-shaped novels he turned to the creation of literature pieces which require more of readers’ engagement. To illustrate, the sequel of “The Fight Club” is a graphic novel which involves more interaction between the reader and the writer. The collection of short stories “Bait: Off-Color Stories for You to Color” (2016) by Palahniuk is also a colouring book. Another example is the fact that the author rewrote one of his earlier books (“Invisible Monsters”) and confessed that his intention was to make a book-magazine out of a traditional book.

Mass media have always been of particular interest to Palahniuk: having received a degree in journalism he moved on to writing novels applying some of the journalistic methods. The first common trait of media means and Palahniuk’s

novels is the characters who they both concentrate on. Glossy magazines are primarily concerned about everything happening around celebrities. The writer does the same in his prose. The heroes of his novels are mostly media people (a media messiah Tender Branson from “Survivor”, a porn queen Cassie Wright from “Snuff”, a famous actress Miss Kenton from “Tell All”). The latter piece of writing is of particular interest as it is constructed as a scenario of a Hollywood film. The narrative is laced with the names of Hollywood stars, and to make them even more notable the writer printed them in bold. According to the contemporary Canadian novelist Michel Basilières, this is *an imitation of the style of old Hollywood gossip columns* [3].

Another common feature of contemporary media and Palahniuk’s work is the use of repetition device, widely applied by advertisers. In the interviews the author admits that repetition is a key to success in embedding information in people’s minds. To give an example, in the novel under study such classical means as a literary allusion is used in the journalistic style: there are two prominent references and both of them are repeated in the narrative several times. “Bouvard et Pecuchet” by Gustave Flaubert and “The Grapes of Wrath” by John Steinbeck are not only mentioned, but described and evaluated by the heroes of “Adjustment Day”. Referring to classics does not make Palahniuk a carrier of mass culture, rather a carrier of culture into masses. His writings are a combination of what he thoroughly knows and what he researches at the moment. In the interview given in December 2020 he says that research is his favorite part of the writing process and is *the fuel that drives his novels* [4]. This method of investigation, derived by Palahniuk from his journalistic experience, is an integral part of the writer’s work. The subject matters he is undertaking to describe may vary greatly within a single novel. Using a reader-focused approach, he intends to distract people from watching TV and involve them in reading, that is why he touches upon various spheres inserting something universally-known into his captivating narratives to satisfy the needs of the many. What rarely changes about Palahniuk’s prose is the setting of the story. Contemporary America is always a matter of his concern and he focuses on the most acute problems of the American society. Being disappointed in the current reality, the authors of the past from time to time resorted to writing dystopian novels. Orwell wrote his famous “1984” in 1948 being oppressed by British Imperialism, and in 2018 Palahniuk writes “Adjustment day” being troubled by modern American individualism, telling in his novels that the US citizens are tired of it and would vote for collectivism. The New Bible in Palahniuk’s dystopian novel is called (in contrast to what they have in the US) – the Declaration of Dependence. The novel under study (as the vast majority of Palahniuk’s writings) is set in America: meaningful events are happening in his native state of Washington and in particular focus is the University of Oregon where Palahniuk got his BA in journalism in 1986. The idea of “Adjustment Day” is based on the theory of a German anthropologist Gunnar Heinsohn who *warned that all great upheavals in history are due to an excess of young men* [5]. The educator states the problem of surplus of ambitious educated sons. This redundant

number needs to be controlled, that is why the government is planning a Middle Eastern war and already digging a tomb for the future-war-fallen soldiers. The older generation seems not to object to these upcoming events as *recent politics had effectively branded young men as an internal enemy – perpetrators of rape culture, school shooters, and neo-Nazis – and media-frightened Americans were glad to see these bad apples culled. The mass media had done its state-instructed job to demonize draft-age men, greasing the skids for their induction* [5]. If these youngsters are not exterminated, there is a risk of a revolution, which, as a matter of fact, takes place in the narrative of “Adjustment Day”. Young males get an ideological leader they need. No one has ever seen him, but he has utmost power. The success of his propaganda is guaranteed by the effective use of mass media. The joint work of TV, radio, print media and on-line resources is widely exploited in the novel. Interestingly, even a new Bible, having appeared to inspire the revolution, looks like “a glossy magazine”. The author presents the new reality, which emerged after the revolution, where American citizens are divided into three kingdoms: Gaysia (for homosexual people), Caucasia (for the whites), Blacktopia (for the blacks). The kings are the ex-addicts being controlled by an old man named Talbott Reynolds whose idea is to check whether it is sometimes good if instead of an ordinary act of sacrificing people to preserve the nation, *the nation would be scuttled every hundred years in order to preserve the people* [5]. With the help of a hedonistic young man, whose only objective is his beloved whom he hopes to win by his future opulence, he issues a new Bible (he also calls it Mein Kampf, Mao’s book of quotations, Saul Alinsky and Quran). The new Bibles are issued in millions and given away for free. There is no opportunity to buy a book – only the chosen people are able to obtain it. And this historically American national ambition (to be the chosen) adds a certain value to the book.

TV and radio constantly broadcast the speeches of the new leader. The only thing which can be seen between the new messiah’s declarations are the advertisements. *The radio was playing, turned up so he could listen. That man, Talbott, was on. No music. No broadcast ballgames. The entire television and radio played nothing but Talbott Reynolds* [5].

Besides free books and constant radio and TV broadcasting, there is the Internet. According to the author, *this book combined with the Internet gimmick of The List – it was a drug* [5]. Internet appears the core instrument, being an interactive element and the trigger of the whole new system. Talbott (with the help of his so-called ‘son’) launches a web-site called “the List” for the masses to be able to indicate the names of the people who irritate them. The “most popular” ones are to be lynched during the Judgement day which is proclaimed to be the beginning of the new history of the USA. Obviously, most votes are given to politicians, professors and journalists. As soon as there are a lot of people who deserve death according to the list, the Judgement day is announced. In the course of this day most of the political and media leaders together with the community of educationalists are executed. The survivors are to serve the new elite. The incentive the revolutionaries follow is to escape being sent and killed at war. They are aware

of the fact that the government planned a war to reduce their large quantity. All the participants (young men of 18, i.e. potential army recruits) start believing in the brighter future when they and their children will live in the ideal world. The plan seems to be working successfully: new kingdoms are established; the people are to migrate according to their race and sexuality. The new-born society should be functioning as follows: the whites would stop dying from hunger, the blacks would stop being repressed, the homosexuals could enjoy the company of their mates. The way of life changes completely: the whites neglect all years of development and resuscitate the medieval rituals and live only to propagate. The blacks, in reverse, throw away the masks of the blunt, humble and obese, open up their wisdom and become virtuous inventors. As for the community of queers, they stop suffering from discrimination as everyone is homosexual in their kingdom. All the benefits of the new order, all the regulations and instructions are being unstoppably advertised via radio and TV. The success of the promotion company is due to the image of the actor who plays the new leader: a mature, fit and good-looking actor who plays Talbott Reynolds *an Absolute Monarch Appointed by the Council of Tribes* [5] on TV. His image is described as follows: a picture of *a pompous man dominating one side. He looked familiar, as if he could've been an actor she'd seen on forgettable television commercials* [5]. According to Palahniuk, the job of an actor is *to make the unreal believable. To spin imaginary straw into tangible gold* [5], so the chosen actor does his best to make meaningless quotes from the Declaration of Dependence sound convincing using the famous intonations of Kennedy and Reagan. It is also pointed out that Piper (for this was the name of the actor) successfully played the parts of President Reagan, Moses and King Lear in the course of his career. He is the perfect choice: he looks respectable, familiar and speaks well, thus comprising all the qualities required for an absolute monarch. Having worked in the sphere of media for many years, Piper never realizes the way celebrities may be used by the media. Palahniuk describes an episode when after receiving a substantial reward for playing Talbott Reynolds, the actor stays at home watching TV and pays attention to the advertisement where *a digitalized Audrey Hepburn continued to work, shilling for Galaxy Chocolates. Fred Astaire sold vacuum cleaners. Marilyn Monroe hawked Snickers candy bars* [5]. He thinks about these actors as ghosts: they are no longer alive, but still interact with people. In several minutes he becomes this kind of ghost himself, he is killed and before he is dead, he only hears his own multiple voices quoting the new Bible on TV. When there are only bones remaining of the celebrated actor, still *the man on the television, whose face might be that of a king or saint or president* [5] is on the screen.

Opposite to the actor's is the description of the creator of the system. He is shown by Palahniuk as *always tied to a chair, ...woozy with blood loss and dappled with scabs and razorblade scars* [5], another time as *a naked old man, his wrists and ankles flapping with scraps of dirty duct tape. His emaciated body looked glossy with dried blood. What might be a hash-mark carpet of tiny stab wounds dotted his spindly arms and legs* [5].

These contrasting images are an imitation of yellow press newspapers style which tend to describe events in black and white. So, the combination of the ideas of one person and smart appearance and artistic talent of the other convince young people of the success of their undertaking. The dramatic image of the new idol is not the only influential factor. Another thing is that the promoted ideology becomes the basis of a new mass culture because it is aimed at a targeted audience consisting of young people as the most vulnerable group. Similarly, the biggest bestsellers in history had been targeted at children and young adults [5]. They had their reason to believe: thanks to mass media, the society did not have mercy on them – they were presented as offenders and terrorists, so even their own parents were ready to send them to war. They belonged to Millennials or Generation Y – the one brought up not only by their parents (generation X), but also by the films about superheroes. These children *were starved for stories depicting similar kids attaining an ultimate power. From Harry Potter to Superman to Luke Skywalker to Robin the Boy Wonder, it would seem that all kids wanted to develop their own latent superpowers and to see their parents dead* [5]. In the course of events, the new kingdoms formed after the revolution start to fight and the final scene of the story presents a by-chance meeting of decamped people who ran away from the new order: a gay, an anti-gay and a feminist, a black, a white, a white pretending to be black and the ex-president of the US. All in rags, having barely survived, they share food they possess and have a picnic. We witness the scene of unity in diversity. The little copy of the world they initially wanted to change. They came to what they previously left, like it was in the repetitively mentioned by Palahniuk Flaubert's "Bouvard et Pecuchet", where two clerks who tried a new way of life, which initially seemed better, finally returned to their former positions as they found them the most satisfactory variant. Similarly, the heroes of Palahniuk's dystopia, having tried the new way of life, seek for salvation in return to the past. Palahniuk's story finishes with an open end. But what is obvious is that the media are responsible for the occurrence of the dreadful events which turned out to be fruitless, though the author points out that the general public is able to realize their negatives. The proof is the fact that media doers are one of the categories of people who got most haters according to the on-line List (*the staggering vote totals went to media figures, actors, journalists* [5]) and are liable to execution. Palahniuk acts as a judge for the modern press – and the heroes of his book are their executors.

The first accusation of the author lies in the fact that contemporary mass media tend to neglect singular cases: journalists pay attention only to recurring events. General public in the novel is knowledgeable about the fact. That is the reason why the characters commit various crimes. The first case to be mentioned is the parents of the protagonist teenager Nick suffering from graffiti punks. The author describes how the young man resolved the issue – *One night, between taggers, he went out with his own can of spray paint. All down two sides of the house he painted swastikas as tall as he could reach. He sprayed the words "Kill Queers" and "Niggers Suck."* The whole job took less than a can of paint. Not that Nick was a Nazi, he just had a plan... Next morning the television crew was

outside. *The street was crowded with people taking pictures. His parents were confused and angry, but he could tell they didn't mind the sympathy. After being ignored for so long, dealing with the graffiti alone, they were glad that the problem now belonged to the entire city.* Finally, the author mentions that the media lauded his parents as brave, long-suffering heroes [5].

Another case is a story about a firefighter whose son (a schoolboy) suffered from racial discrimination. As a result of the accident when his son was severely beaten by his classmates, which the father could not prevent, he worked out a plan to incinerate the schools in the area. One by one they are burnt down by the firefighter in an attempt to attract the attention of the media.

Finally, the strongest case is the abduction of the antagonist of the story. The old man Talbot (the author of the new Bible) is kidnapped by a teenager (who eventually becomes “the hands” of the revolution) and kept in the basement for a year – nobody notices his disappearance as the case is a singular one. If the press had paid attention to this case, the revolution described in the novel would not have happened and many lives could have been saved. Suchwise, the writer makes the media responsible not only for imparting information which contradicts common sense into people's minds, but for the rise in crime rates.

Another disturbing feature of the modern media is their carelessness. The father of the young protagonist (Nick) occasionally dies from an aneurysm in his brain which burst when the man was mowing the lawn. The obituary for Nick's dad said, *A beloved husband and father, the deceased died as a result of a cerebral hemorrhoid. The word everyone was looking for was hemorrhage;... Just that one word, and the newspaper couldn't get it right* [5]. The author of the obituary did not care that the mistake could be a shame and deep offence for the family.

Ridiculously, the same thing happens to the new Bible – when publishing it Walter (the boy of the new messiah) makes a mistake in the title: the author intended to name it “A Judgement Day” but billions of books are printed under the name of “Adjustment Day”. The reporter did not care about that like the media do care only about the scope not about how exact the facts they present are. The existence of such similar approaches convincingly proves the New Bible to have much in common with a glossy tabloid. Additionally, the author highlights that besides messing up the name of the book *God only knew what else Walter had misheard* [5]. Supposedly, the writer intends to emphasize how doubtful the information carried into masses is.

The plot of the novel under study shows the destructive features of the media. Obviously, Palahniuk detests some aspects of the journalistic approach, nevertheless, he successfully applies some proven methods in his novels, which, undoubtedly, empower the author with a certain influence over his readership. Moreover, the work of mass media described in the narrative helps the plot to successfully function, making a dystopia believable. Showing broadcast, on-line and print media in his recent writings, the author demonstrates how influential the media have become due, mainly, to the two reasons: their joint work (they become the strongest influencers when the same message is delivered by all the means: TV,

radio, internet, magazines); their being targeted – they aim at the most sensitive community, namely Millennials. This generation is a targeted audience for the writer as well; he uses his powers, adopted from the media, and sheds light on the imperfections of mass media, warning the contemporary generation by depicting how vulnerable they may be.

## LITERATURE

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