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ECHOES FROM *FIGHT CLUB*: CATEGORICAL THINKING, NARRATIVE STRATEGIES, AND POLITICAL RADICALISM IN CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S *ADJUSTMENT DAY*[1]

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ABSTRACT. This work addresses Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Adjustment Day* as a satirical critique of the political radicalization of the USA and as a warning about the dangerous ideological effects narratives may have on our posthumanist understanding of reality. To reach his purposes, the novelist combines three stylistic strategies. First, he creates a satirical story that exposes the condition of American politics, the dangers of radicalized political correctness, and the present risks of populist revolutions. Secondly, he uses explicit metafictional references to *Fight Club* and to other literary works and critical theories to warn about the dangerous effects that the power of narrative can have. Finally, Palahniuk departs from the minimalist style he used in his earlier and most well-known fiction in favor of a heterodiegetic and omniscience narrative voice that, combined with multiple internal focalizations, endorses a plural, non-categorical understanding of reality.

Keywords: Chuck Palahniuk, categorical thinking, Borges, posthumanism, *Fight Club*, *Adjustment Day*.

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ECOS DE *FIGHT CLUB*: PENSAMIENTO CATEGÓRICO, ESTRATEGIAS NARRATIVAS Y RADICALISMO POLÍTICO EN *ADJUSTMENT DAY*, *DE CHUCK PALAHNIUK*

RESUMEN. Este artículo estudia la novela *Adjustment Day*, de Chuck Palahniuk, como una crítica satírica del radicalismo político de los EE.UU. y como una advertencia de los peligrosos efectos ideológicos que la narrativa ejerce sobre nuestra comprensión posthumanista de la realidad. Para alcanzar sus fines, el novelista combina tres estrategias estilísticas. En primer lugar, crea una historia satírica que denuncia la situación de la vida política estadounidense, los peligros que encierra una corrección política radicalizada y el presente riesgo de revoluciones populistas. En segundo lugar, el escritor utiliza referencias metaficcionales a *Fight Club* y a otras obras literarias y teorías críticas para advertir sobre los peligrosos efectos que el poder de la narrativa puede alcanzar. Finalmente, Palahniuk abandona el estilo minimalista que había utilizado en sus primeras y más conocidas novelas en favor de una voz narrativa heterodiegética y omnisciente que, sin embargo, al combinarse con múltiples focalizadores internos, apunta a la necesidad de entender la realidad desde posiciones que eviten el pensamiento categórico.

Palabras clave: Chuck Palahniuk, pensamiento categórico, posthumanismo, Borges, *Fight Club*, *Adjustment Day*.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This work evaluates the ideological implications that Chuck Palahniuk builds in his novel *Adjustment Day* (2018) as a critique of the present political radicalization of the USA and the need to restore more ethical and compromising views in the political and social arena. The novel received a mixed reception among reviewers.[2] A few thought that *Adjustment Day* was a good book, with brilliant and provocative aspects (Sheehan 2018: 2, Mond 2018) but they regretted the lack of a clear chronological line and the eventual disappearance from the plot of a pair of characters—Dawson and Ramantha—who became lost in what looked like a flawed ending (Blum 2018: 2). For some reviewers, the book offered nothing but a new critique of American society, being a mere sequel to *Fight Club* (Arzate 2018) which Palahniuk published in 1996. Other critics, while also remarking the similarities with *Fight Club*, missed a more conventional narrative line and saw authorial failure resulting from what they took to be a weak and disheveled story, which was difficult to understand because it did not follow any apparent chronological order in the presentation of events (Takami 2018: 2, Wolter 2018). In effect, the plot demands very active readers who wish to rearrange the lacking chronological order and make sense of the book. However, efforts to understand the story may also help them to

[2] At the time of writing this article, no studies on Palahniuk's novel have been found in any peer-reviewed journal.

discover the existence of significant formal and ideological differences between the new novel and *Fight Club*, and the reasons why Palahniuk decided to reevaluate the political situation of the country two decades after the publication of his most famous book.

As argued in the following pages, to forward his new objectives in *Adjustment Day* Palahniuk combines three relevant stylistic strategies. First, he uses a satirical approach to expose the alleged corrupt condition of American politics. Secondly, in what looks like a return to postmodern strategies, the writer uses explicit metafictional references to *Fight Club* but also to other literary works and critical theories to warn about the power that narrative has to create and impose ideologies. Finally, he departs from the characteristic minimalist style he used in his earlier and most popular fiction in favor of a heterodiegetic and omniscience narrative voice that, combined with multiple internal focalizations, helps his novel to offer as ethical solution to the present sociopolitical situation a plural and cooperative understanding of reality. As already discussed by early poststructuralist critics, in post-postmodern times Palahniuk reaffirms again the necessity to avoid categorical thinking because it only leads to one-sided and authoritarian views of reality. Accordingly, *Adjustment Day* becomes a sustained warning about the dangers of returning to traditional categorical views while, at the same time, it denounces the radicalization of both right-winged populist politics and left-winged excessive political correctness.

2. OF FAILED REVOLUTIONS AND SATIRICAL EXCESS: FROM *FIGHT CLUB* TO THE CONTROL OF INFORMATION

A novel written in the mode of speculative and dystopian fiction, *Adjustment Day* fits the genre of the satire in its targeting of humanist categorical thinking and the pervasiveness it shows in present political and academic radicalisms. Misleadingly, the book aims its first attacks at the ideological effects of postmodernism, especially at its alleged lack of solid values (cf. Bauman 2000) and at the apparent radicalized views held by some liberal academics. However, Palahniuk's satire mostly focuses on the alarming rise of authoritarian and populist regimes in the first years of the twenty-first century and on the role that mass and social media play in the collective understanding of reality and politics. The publication of the book in 2018 coincided with the period in which Donald Trump held the presidency of the United States, a time in which he received frequent accusations of populism and which led to the failed attack on the Capitol by many of his followers on January 6, 2021. In fact, the first years of the new millennium saw the rise of different populist and authoritarian regimes. From the left to the right of the political spectrum, in Nicaragua, Brasil, Russia, or even in an European country such as Hungary, recent regressive political moves suggest that at present democracy may be experiencing a dangerous backlash.

Satire is a genre that fundamentally invites us to reflect on political and social issues.[3] By speculating on a fictionalized reality, whose flaws are frequently described in exaggerated terms, it induces readers to think about the differences existing between the world as it is and the world as we would like it to be. As exemplified by both classic and modern writers and as defined by critics from Northrop Frye to David Hume, satire is a genre ultimately rooted both in ethics and in the idea that creative literature may play an important role in building a better world (see Frye 1957: 223-224, Weisenburger 1995: 2-20, Hume 2007: 305-306, Bradshaw 2008: 218-231, McFarlane 2011: 153-172). Accordingly, Palahniuk's novel offers a transgressive and grotesque depiction of what a populist revolution might presently signify for the USA.

The political situation that *Adjustment Day* describes in its first pages is conspiratorial and terrifying. After a beginning *in medias res* that anticipates the confusing non-chronological presentation of events in the novel, the author fictionalizes a situation in which the USA Government is ready to declare war on some undefined Middle East countries with the secret aim of getting rid of a whole generation of young American males. A nuclear device will eliminate the conscripted youth soon after the breaking of hostilities. By resorting to the didactic quality that Palahniuk's narrative voices frequently show in his fiction, the unidentified and omniscient narrator openly points the accusatory finger at American politicians. However, the writer also aims his satire at the type of academics who, posing as liberal put into practice a radical version of political correctness and historical revisionism that infects their criticism with a new type of categorical essentialism. Thus, the narrator informs readers that, according to the theories taught by a certain Dr. Brolly, "all major political upheavals in history were due to an excess of young males" (Palahniuk 2018: 11). Dr. Brolly offers, as an example of such theory, the Conquest of America, when legions of young "conquistadores enslaved and pillaged the innocent Maya and Aztecs" (12). Ironically, the narrator later reports that for this type of academics, the "paintings and carvings reputed to show Aztecs" ripping out the hearts or severing heads of other people actually were "successful heart

[3] There are various and sometimes opposed definitions of satire; some critics even argue that it is not a genre but a mode. For the purpose of this article, Katherine Hume's "family features… present in works generally accepted as satires" are illuminating (2007: 305): "(1) Attack is central to definitions of satire, though theorists quarrel over whether the attack must have a historically specific target or whether general human problems will suffice. (2) Humor or wit modifies the attack and differentiates it from hell fire sermonizing or foul-mouthed name-calling, and part of this wit is (3) The author's glorying in his or her literary performance. (4) Sometimes understood as a manifestation of the wit but often separable from it is a penchant for exaggeration, extrapolation of present patterns to a more extreme future version, and fantasy. (5) Another element that sets satire apart from extravagant insult, say, is a hard kernel we are asked to recognize as moral or existential truth, however much we may sense that it is being twisted or distorted. (6) Since attacks are rarely launched out of loving kindness, another element is some version of authorial malice, disgust, righteous indignation, or an attitude of mockery and ironic disparagement. (7) The approach, however, may include inquiry rather than confident condemnation" (305).

transplant surgeries" and "successful full head transplants" (187). The story also evokes episodes of recent history to suggest the lack of parallelisms and the political differences that allegedly exist between the country's present time and the countercultural 1960s. As Senator Daniels realizes, no protesters opposed the new conscription and the declaration of war at the National Mall; the protests against the Vietnam War that took place fifty years earlier were not repeated now (20). The senator also adds conspiratorially that the "mass media had done its state-instructed job to demonize draft-age men, greasing the skids for their induction" (21).

Nevertheless, Daniels proves to be wrong and soon social unrest leads to a revolutionary uprising against the current status quo, whose perversity the story unambiguously links to the results of the countercultural revolution of the 1960s and the subsequent rise of liberal criticism, as well as to the power that narrative exerts over our lives. Thus, *Adjustment Day* describes as fundamental factors that motivate the new revolution issues directly related to race, gender, and sexual option, which have been predominant in Palahniuk's early fiction as well as key matters in the postmodern revolution. However, in the satirical analysis of the novel it soon becomes clear that for the young protagonists of the twenty-first century novel, the values of freedom and social equality proclaimed in the countercultural 1960s were never attained. Accordingly, Talbott Reynolds,[4] the main theoretician of the new revolution in *Adjustment Day* and one of the clear targets of Palahniuk's satire, sees the failure of the counterculture and the postmodern period in their impossibility to build new values and put them into action: "Talbott's intuition had been spot-on. The 1960s had torn down all the patterns for living. Since then, generations had wandered through their lives in search of a shared blueprint" (Palahniuk 2018: 275).

Wrapped in the excesses of the satire, Palahniuk's story mixes the gore of popular culture motifs (Larman 2018: 1, Mond 2018, Blum 2018: 4) with explicit political theory while subtly evaluating the present condition of American politics and the risks it is exposed to. Hence, the theoretician offers his marginalized young followers an old categorical recipe for a new social design, which represents the core of his revolution: "As Talbott saw it, race and sexual preference had to become the last bastion for community" (Palahniuk 2018: 275-276). Populism and the young people's aversion to the extremely biased opinions of some liberal academics combine with the humorous notion of "identity fatigue" (108), resulting in the collapse of the "united states" [sic] and the subsequent establishment of a new political (dis)order. As a result, following a satirical Declaration of Interdependence, Reynolds's theories take Palahniuk's story to a critical evaluation mostly concerned with the effects of race and gender politics. In the resulting sinister division of the country in three disunited and confronting territories, the writer plays with stereotypes and categorical excess to build his satire. Thus, Caucasia becomes the new kingdom for pure heterosexual whites only, with their breed building up a new Eurocentric Dark Ages. Led by Chieftain Charlie, the young whites' simplicity and wish to reestablish

[4] T. R., perhaps a reference to Theodor Roosevelt and the implication that the 26th President of the United States was a "populist conservative".

patriarchal traditions take them even to reinstate the cult to Odin and Thor (173). The narrator also informs readers that "Generation Sex" was their motto (180). Grotesquely echoing the command given by God to humankind in Genesis 1:28, Palahniuk has Caucasia's main aim to repopulate the country with as many white babies as possible. Meanwhile, they force women to serve only as wombs for procreation and labor hands to cultivate the fields, in what turns out to be a patriarchal return to an agricultural economy that clearly echoes Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Gaysia, the new nation where gays live, is the only place where race miscegenation is allowed. Eventually, their economy fails and, as happened to the whites, they need to rely on increasing the number of births to overcome the crisis, which means the need to carry out a general conscription of men and women to be used in assisted reproduction. Thus, in these two new states parenthood becomes a central political issue that clearly results in new types of slavery and human trafficking, one of the major concerns of present western societies. Finally, Blacktopia becomes a fantastic technological and magical paradise that only African-Americans can populate. Palahniuk portrays it as hilarious parody of a utopic high-technological realm that reviewers soon associated to the Black Panther's Kingdom of Wakanda, from the Marvel Comics and Cinematic Universe (Arzate 2018, Larman 2018: 2).

However, what looks like a disarranged and strongly grotesque satire also grows increasingly metafictional. Readers who are familiar with Palahniuk's early fiction may soon realize the existence of both explicit and covert references to his first-published novel, *Fight Club* (1996). The following pages contend that by evoking and parodying his famous book, the writer denounces that social conditions do not seem to have improved much since the 1990s, which reinforces his satire on contemporary times. Thus, the young men who follow the new populist doctrine described in Talbott Reynolds's book—metafictionally called "Adjustment Day"—carry out a new revolution that strongly echoes *Fight Club* and especially Tyler Durden's radical project because their living conditions and social expectations have not changed much in the last twenty-five years. They still belong to the social group that Jon-Arild Johannessen denominates the "precariat", the ever-increasing number of people whom globalization and technology have enslaved in poorly paid jobs or condemned to short-spam lives as work-vagabonds and underpaid workers (2019: 4-21).[5] Evoking some episodes in the earlier novel, the uprising promoted by Reynolds demands the extermination of the social actors who, in his view, sustain

[5] Johannessen defines the precariat as people who "feel betrayed by the political and financial elite. They are desperate and angry, but have nobody else to vent their frustration and anger on than the elite" (2019: 8). He also refers to one of the sub-groups of the precariat as "the working poor," a class that strongly recalls Palahniuk's depiction of the "space monkeys" who fell in Durden's fascist trap in *Fight Club*: "The working poor thus struggle against the feeling of hopelessness, and are forced to take bad jobs at bad wages. In terms of economic survival, they are constantly moving towards the bottom and almost falling into poverty. The working poor also constitute the future labor reserve, and they are willing to do any job for low wages so as not to sink deeper into the swamp of poverty" (11).

the status quo that resulted from the previous postmodern revolution. However, on this occasion, Palahniuk conspicuously augments the power social media and the new technologies have in contemporary times. The rebellion he describes in *Adjustment Day* is addressed to posthuman beings who have been engulfed by the society of information, even if they belong to its margins (see Hayles 1999: 1-24, Mahon 2017: 18).[6] The revolution starts when, following the results of a referendum on a website created for Reynolds, a number of young hitmen begin killing politicians, reporters, and academics—especially scholars in the field of Gender Studies—because they are the most voted people on the website list. As if it were a videogame, by murdering them the young men earn points that will help them to advance their social status in the new resulting social order. Thus, the website list creates a hyperreality. Jean Baudrillard's third-order simulacrum (1983: 2) enters the story of *Adjustment Day* in an evocation of what actually happened in the case of *Fight Club*, when adepts of David Fincher's film version (1999) started to set up actual fight clubs.

The satirically excessive and brutal condition of Reynolds's revolution becomes evident in the fact that the young murderers have to cut one of the ears of each one of their victims as proof of the killing. The more ears they collect, the higher they advance in the resulting social hierarchy. Hence, Palahniuk warns about the new condition of young men who, engulfed by the society of information, qualify as posthuman and have become enslaved not just by conventional drugs but by addictive social media, which produces their paradoxical regress to a savage kind of primitivism. The Internet list becomes a hyperreal referendum that turns them into murderers. As some of them soon realize, controlling the media will also help them to control the new revolution. Philosopher Biung-Chul Han argues that "without reference, politics deteriorates into a matter of referendum" (2015: 7). In *Adjustment Day*, the apparent transparency of the referendum voted in the Internet becomes the staging of populist activism, reducing the power of political ideology to mere opinions in the form of likes and dislikes. From that point on, information and the effects that it produces on real life, in the form of narrative, turns out to be one of the crucial themes in the book. As the narrator eventually reveals, the only "other task Talbott had ordered [Walter] to carry out, was to build a website. […] This yammering, grimacing, demented old man had demanded the site be called simply The List" (Palahniuk 2018: 130-31). The List, Reynolds' book, and different and contradictory reports on how the new revolution is progressing in various places, offer a clear indication that Palahniuk roots his fiction on a nominalist approach. About five decades ago, nominalism was brought back to critical

[6] Strongly relying on Norbert Wiener's ideas, in her book *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) N. Katherine Hayles understands the evolution of human into posthuman as being the result of a strong techno-scientific and cultural change. This critic links the new paradigmatic condition to the increasing cultural understanding that the new posthuman being is the result of information and information patterns, a notion that stands very close to the poststructuralist idea that narrative [semiotic codes] always mediates the relation existing between the self and reality. See also Baelo & Calvo (2021: 1-19).

discussion by postmodernism and its resulting poststructuralisms, which concluded that people are inescapably exposed to the power of narrative, which acts as a Platonic cave that conditions the self's representation of reality (see White 1980 and his notion of "narrativity"). Since then, among relevant American writers such as Thomas Pynchon in *Against the Day* (2006), Corman McCarthy in *The Road* (2006) or Edgar Lawrence Doctorow in *Andrew's Brain* (2014), stories may be viewed as dangerous because they create and destroy social values but also because they may encourage violence and murder, a notion already central in Palahniuk's earlier fiction, as clearly shown in *Lullaby* (2002) and *Haunted* (2005).

In line with the social risks analyzed in *Fight Club*, in *Adjustment Day* Palahniuk decries again the existence of a young generation of men who feel cheated by the status quo. With respect to his early novel, Eduardo Mendieta perceptively contends that "Project Mayhem aims to make us aware of the ways in which social order is predicated on the code of civility, which can also turn into a code of servility" (2013: 49). Accordingly, *Fight Club* aims at disclosing that, as regards the generation of young American men of the 1990s, the political rulers of the country have not fulfilled the social contract, which constitutes the main pillar for democracy and the people's sovereignty. As a result, Mendieta argues, men "cannot but feel betrayed, and they in turn betray that society. They opt out of the social contract of trust that sustains that society" (51). More than twenty years later, Palahniuk describes a younger generation of American males who have been let down again by the status quo. As happened to the earlier generation, they feel the need to rebel against the system, on this occasion specifically represented by politicians, some academics, and the media. Satirically but also reverting to postmodern and poststructuralist theories, Palahniuk implies that Reynolds wants to eliminate these three groups of people because they are the creators and manipulators of the social narratives that give support to the status quo; the control of information is key to political power.

As the writer already fictionalized in *Fight Club*, the disaffected are ready to rise once more against their hypocritical social leaders. When some young men, chosen among those who try to escape from drug addictions, find out that their generation is going to be exterminated in the coming war, they become more and more addicted to Reynolds's populist theories. Strongly echoing *Fight Club*, the young men attend lectures given by their leader "in a basement" that becomes "a clubhouse of sorts" (Palahniuk 2018: 263). Also in clear evocation of his most famous novel, Palahniuk links the beginning of the new social revolution to a love story. If his love for Marla triggered the narrator's mental breakdown in *Fight Club* (Palahniuk 1996: 14, 193-197), in *Adjustment Day* Walter kidnaps Reynolds hoping that the old man may help him to become rich and, thus, conquer Shasta's heart. Instead, Reynolds dictates to Walter the dangerous book that will drastically change the fate of the United States and bring about Walter's own death. As the satirical excess increasingly takes over the story, the pages of *Adjustment Day* evaluate in detail the disastrous results that originate in Reynolds's dangerous book and its populist ideas. More and more, Reynolds's ideas resound of Tyler Durden's authoritarian political beliefs in *Fight Club*. Thus, being both leaders of marginalized young men, they also share an

intense masochistic attraction for their own bodies, which is associated to the old belief that the truth reveals itself by means of suffering. As Robert T. Schultz contends about the schizoid protagonist in the film version of *Fight Club*,

> It is through pain […] that he finds meaning and direction in his life, if not happiness, and he experiences that pain by organizing and participating in a "fight club" that meets regularly in the basement of a bar. Here he learns that the pain he receives and inflicts through bare-knuckled, no-holds-barred street fighting with other alienated white guys is something real in a world of falsehoods. (2011: 584)

Durden founded the fight clubs to experience the reality of feeling alive by means of blows and kicks. Likewise, Reynolds tricks Walter, his kidnapper and amanuensis, into inflicting a large number of little cuts on his body. His wounds make Reynolds almost bleed to death along his *illuminating* process of dictating the revolutionary book to his assistant (Palahniuk 2018: 115). One of the aphorisms of his book casts light on his masochistic practices: "Pain and sickness will always befall men. Choose yours, be it the pain from manual labor or the sickness of overexertion. Schedule it. Savor it. Use your pain so it will not use you" (70).

However, the most important notion that joins the two novels together is the idea that the emphasis on hybridity and liminality that the counterculture and postmodernism held as one of their main ideological banners has given way again to the rule of categorical thinking and the reestablishment of old humanist barriers.[7] While in *Fight Club* authoritarian Tyler Durden pursues the coming back of the virile man and demands the anarchic destruction of society to restore an early stage of alleged freedom, in *Adjustment Day* Reynolds openly demands the reestablishment of ancient categorical frontiers and social prejudice. Consequently, following the success of his revolution, people become separated according to their race and sexual preference. Mulattos, creoles, mestizos, or bisexuals are hybrid beings who cannot find a place to live in any of the three resulting nations and many of them are condemned to abandon their homeland. Categorically, only the pure white, the pure black, and the pure gay can stay in their corresponding zone. However, in a clear stylistic opposition to categorical thinking, in *Adjustment Day* Palahniuk also

[7] Categorical thinking is the philosophical notion that explains the pervasive existence of binaries in our understanding of reality and the linguistic prevalence of statements over questions. In Section V of his *Categories*, Aristotle affirms that "while remaining numerically one and the same", substance is the only category "capable of admitting contrary qualities". Things other than substance do not possess this mark, which leads the philosopher to proclaim his Law of the Excluded Middle, "one and the same color cannot be white and black. Nor can the same one action be good and bad: this law holds good with everything that is not substance". Furthermore, in the same section of *Categories* the philosopher reminds readers that even substance cannot admit contrary qualities at the same moment, thus giving rise to categorical thinking and to the ideological importance of binaries (see Section IX of *Categories*). For an analysis of the rejection of categorical thinking and its binary understanding of reality in postmodernism and poststructuralist theory, see Solomon (1988: Chapters 13 and 14).

deploys a more conceited metafictional strategy that helps to clarify his political agenda and the abrupt end that he gives to his story.

3. SUPPLEMENTING *FIGHT CLUB*: TRAPPED IN JORGE LUIS BORGES'S NARRATIVE SPIDER-WEB

Together with his evocation of *Fight Club* and the characteristic excesses of the satire, in *Adjustment Day* Palahniuk uses intertextual references to other influential books in support of the nominalist notion that narrative is an inescapable screen existing between the self and reality. Sometimes metafictional comments prompt misleading comical situations that ironize on the actual power of certain books, as happens when Reynolds finds out that Walter has sent his revolutionary manuscript to the press with a huge error in the title:

> Talbott snarled "What's it called?"
> Walt run a fingertip under the title. "*Adjustment Day*."
> […] Talbott said, "You, idiot! Stop the presses!"
> It was too late, but Walter didn't say that.
> "I told you to call the book *A Judgement Day*!" (Palahniuk 2018: 278)

The slip is ideologically significant because Reynolds's original title is a clear reference to the Day of Judgment, the most powerful example of categorical thinking in the Bible, a final event that divides humankind between the blessed and the damned, whereas Adjustment Day, semantically speaking, can potentially refer to a process of negotiation that seeks a final balanced situation.

In another key episode, the story becomes a comical self-critique of Palahniuk's fiction. Anticipating the fate that eventually befalls white chieftain Charlie, Reynolds contends that *Fight Club* is not about empowering men, as Walter argues. Reynolds replies, "Palahniuk. All of his work is about castration. Castration or abortion" (157). Clearly, his opinion does not only enrich the laughable character of the satire but also testifies to Palahniuk's acknowledgement that his fiction is open to radically different interpretations.

However, in what seems to be a more serious tone, the importance of Reynolds's "Adjustment Day" volume becomes associated to other, actual books characterized by their social impact, such as the Bible or, more dramatically, Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (1925):

> Talbott had explained that while Adolf Hitler had been a prisoner in Landsberg Prison, his cell had been the sight of a constant party […]. The ideas that resonated, that made Hitler's listeners smile in recognition, Hitler collected those ideas into his first draft of *Mein Kampf* […]. And so Talbott had conducted a similar back-and-forth dialogue with the men who made their pilgrimage to consult him. (264)

Reynolds also associates his book to the *Kama Sutra*, to *Ecclesiastes* and to *The Golden Verses of Pythagoras*, "A modern *Mein Kampf* as it were" (265). He tells

Walter that "A Good Book Should Get You High" while his amanuensis gradually realizes that the book the theoretician has been dictating to him "amounted to a pornography of power" (269).

The idea that a single book may become a powerful political weapon makes *Adjustment Day* adhere to the poststructuralist tenet that, since the 1960s, highlights the power of discourse to filter our knowledge of reality (Sarup 1993: 5-90). In addition, the poststructuralist—ultimately nominalist—notion that sustains that the self is always mediated by semiotic codes merges in Palahniuk's fiction with Baudrillard's critical concept of the third order of simulacra. As mentioned above, such notion appeared explicitly in his early fiction; "the copy of a copy of a copy" of a reality inexorably escaping our understanding is a repeated motif in *Fight Club* (Palahniuk 1996: 21, see Baudrillard 1983: 2).[8] In addition, in *Adjustment Day* the third-order simulacrum is already "preceded" by the work of Jorge Luis Borges, an author who has exerted a profound influence on American fiction since the early stages of postmodernism.

There is a key moment in the novel when Reynolds tells Walter to start attending support groups of drug-addicts as a strategy to spread his ideas (Palahniuk 2018: 229). In fact, Palahniuk had already disclosed the importance that support groups have for his own poetica in one of the essays included in his book *Stranger Than Fiction: True Stories* (2004). According to it, one of the main strategies the writer used to gather information before writing a novel was to join support groups and listen to other people's stories. In the meetings he attended, Palahniuk could experience a face-to-face emotional encounter with other people, brought about by the act of telling stories. He expressed his beliefs that the world is made of people who want to tell him their stories, and that his role is to be a listener and then use those stories for his own fiction (Palahniuk 2004: XVII *et seq*, compare to Levinas 1989: 82-84). However, even if in *Adjustment Day* the emotional communion that attending support groups should represent becomes nothing but Reynolds's perverse strategy to trap adepts and use them to start the violent uprising, the novel also refers to the ideological importance of storytelling by means of another, more conceited strategy. *Adjustment Day* reveals a direct influence from Borges's short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and its implication that reality always hides under several narrative layers.

In Borges's short story, collected in his volume *Ficciones* (1941), the narrator recounts how by chance he learnt about the existence of a pirated copy of volume XLVI of the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*, published in New York in 1917, being

[8] For Baudrillard, postmodern simulation is "a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real" (1983: 2). Then, to clarify his point, he argues the existence of three orders of simulacra. In the first one, the image is a clear counterfeit of the real. In the second order, which he associates to the First Industrial Revolution, the distinction between the image and the preceding real begins to dissolve. Finally, we are confronted with a precession of the simulacrum in what he terms the third-order simulacrum, "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (2).

itself a copy of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Such volume proves to be unique because it has four extra pages about an unknown region in Asia Minor called Uqbar. Eventually, the narrator and his friend Bioy Casares—a real writer and Borges's actual friend—discover that the Uqbar section was the beginning of a more ambitious plan to write an encyclopedia about the invented planet of Tlön. The imprint of the forged copy of the forged encyclopedia, which leads to the subsequent encyclopedia about an inexistent planet, contains the expression "Orbis Tertius" (the tertiary world). Later, the narrator receives the copy of a volume of the *First Encyclopedia of Tlön* and then he realizes that progressively such *Encyclopedia*, copy of a forged copy of a copy of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is invading his reality, the reader's reality. He finally guesses in an appendix to the tale that "The world will become Tlön" (Borges 1986 [1941]: 36). However, Borges's nominalist approach, that precedes Baudrillard's ideas on the third-order simulacrum, is not the only element that marks the existence of a direct intertextual link with *Adjustment Day*. In his story, Borges's narrator becomes interested in the forged encyclopedia following a conversation with Casares in which they debate about the notion that mirrors and copulation are abominable. This leads Casares to check his forged copy of the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* where, in the extra pages dedicated to Uqbar, he finds the following words: "For one of these Gnostics, the visible universe was an illusion or (more precisely) a sophism. *Mirrors and fatherhood are abominable* […] because they multiply and disseminate it" (15, my translation).[9] This characteristic Borgesian idea about paternity understood as the dissemination of an illusory universe finds its correlation in one of the aphorisms of Reynolds's "Adjustment Day" book: "*Whether it's by breeding children or preaching, it's what men do: This constant dissemination of self.*" (Palahniuk 2018: 181; italics in the original). Even if preaching has replaced Borges's mirrors in Palahniuk's novel, Talbott Reynolds's interpretation of reality is similarly nominalist, as he truly believes in the tremendous political power his book will have. Almost at the end of the novel, the narrator describes an early event in which Reynolds repeats to Walter the same aphorism about breeding children. The episode starts with the narrator's voice stating, "According to Talbott, their book would change the world" (303). While Walter does not want the book to interfere in their actual lives, Reynolds is already convinced that, as happens in the case of Borges's *Encyclopedia of Tlön*, the book brings a substantial change into the world (304). Ironically, breeding children eventually becomes the only activity that keeps the economies of Caucasia and Gaysia going at the same time as it becomes a process that enslaves them.

Borges's precedence of Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal and the three orders of simulacra in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" shows the intertextual power his short fiction still has, as reflected not only in postmodern works but also in later literature and criticism (Herbrechter and Callus 2007: 182-92). As mentioned earlier, Baudrillard's notion also anticipated the hyperreal power of *Fight Club*, a proof of

[9] In the original: "Para uno de esos gnósticos, el visible universo era una ilusión o (más precisamente) un sofisma. Los espejos y la paternidad son abominables (mirrors and fatherhood are abominable) porque lo multiplican y lo divulgan". (Borges 1986 [1941]: 15).

the power narrative has to generate reality. In fact, on several occasions Palahniuk has commented on the effects the film version of his novel had on his real life. After the release of the film, waiters would offer him free meals, and people would fight in secret clubs in New Jersey or London; "more and more", writes he, already echoing the end of Borges's tale, "what little was fiction [in *Fight Club*] is becoming reality" (Palahniuk 2004: 228). Thus, in *Adjustment Day* the writer has created a further metafictional loop. His later novel resounds of the creative power of *Fight Club*, which itself foresaw such power by including among its pages Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal, already foreseen by Borges in his fiction, whose prints appear in Palahniuk's later novel.

In any case, *Adjustment Day* does not simply warn readers about the possible dangers involved in the power of narrative but also of that "dissemination of [illusory narrative] self" that by means of copies of copies, trapped in a narrative mode of infinite regress, would impede any reliable knowledge of reality. Hence, when Reynolds's followers kill Walter and think that Reynolds is dead, they replace him with an actor; that is to say, with a copy who teaches people what to do via TV and radio programs by dictating the aphorisms of his book "Adjustment Day". The broadcast book thus becomes a copy of the original one, itself (mis)named after the book we are reading, evoking once again Borges's entrapping structure in his short story and the power that mass media exert over our narrative representation of reality (cf. White 1980: 5-27).

The fact that the contents of Talbott Reynolds's book are written in aphorisms adds to the dangers inherent in the power of narrative; they are categorical generalizations that seek to address, explain, and amend the most important social problems. Furthermore, Reynolds's aphorisms also recall Durden's categorical standpoint, manifested in his brief rules for the Fight Clubs, even if the first ideologue is right-winged and Durden openly proclaims his anarchist stance. Some reviewers have pointed out that George Orwell's *1984* (1949) aphorisms reverberate in Reynolds's authoritarian prose (Larman 2018: 1, Mond 2018). Moreover, his book "Adjustment Day" also compares to other influential texts written in brief statements with the aim of teaching the truth about life such as Laozi's *Tao Te Ching* or Friedrich Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*. Fortunately, when narratives from the left or from the right argue in favor of radicalized, violent, and monolithic political positions, the ethical need arises to counteract them, which Palahniuk does by resorting to more stylistic strategies as ideological weapons.

4. MINIMALISM LEFT BEHIND: DEPARTING FROM THE STYLE OF *FIGHT CLUB*

In his autobiographic volume *Stranger Than Fiction* (2004), Palahniuk defines his writings as being ideologically transgressive—close to Annesley's definition of "Blank fiction" (1998: 137-140)—and he also confesses his devotion for the type of minimalist narrative written by Amy Hempel. Following Hempel's stylistic model, Palahniuk defines his early fiction as "writing without passing judgment. Nothing is fed to the reader as 'fat' or 'happy.' You can only describe actions and appearances

in a way that makes a judgment occur in the reader's mind" (Palahniuk 2004: 144). A small number of characters and events, a narrative voice that is frequently the protagonist of the story and a simple syntax helped to create the minimalist style of his first novels. In fact, Palahniuk's early narratives follow Ernest Hemingway's erstwhile minimalist "theory of the iceberg" rather than Abády-Nagy's thematic analysis of contemporary minimalism in fiction (2001: 129-143).[10]

However, even if *Adjustment Day* shares with *Fight Club* a number of themes and topics, stylistically the later novel is far from minimalist poetics. On the contrary, it uses the old realist device of a heterodiegetic narrator gifted with omniscient powers. Such retreat to the classic realist strategy that helped to reinforce the political structures of capitalism in its early stages seems to sanction the return, on the level of the story, to old patriarchal values once the young men successfully carry out the retrograde revolution initiated on Adjustment Day.[11] This apparent return to classic realism is misleading because Palahniuk combines the use of the single omniscient voice with a number of internal focalizers that offer his readers different perspectives—either contradictory or complementary—about the new type of society that results from Reynolds's revolution. In fact, in one of the interviews he conceded following the release of the novel, Palahniuk mentioned that he had copied the strategy from John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), a novel also mentioned explicitly in *Adjustment Day*.[12] In imitation of Steinbeck's strategy, the author does not use a single point of view from which to evaluate events and characters but several ones. Palahniuk's deployment of multiple focalizers offers diverse ways to perceive reality in a story in which, by contrast, the ideology

[10] Hemingway's famous words clearly befit the minimalist style of novels such as *Invisible Monsters* or *Fight Club*: "If a writer stops observing he is finished. But he does not have to observe consciously nor think how it will be useful. Perhaps that would be true at the beginning. But later everything he sees goes into the great reserve of things he knows or has seen. If it is any use to know it, I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg. It is the part that doesn't show. If a writer omits something because he does not know it then there is a hole in the story" (Plimpton 1958: 12).

[11] Paul Dawson offers an interesting analysis about the return to omniscience among contemporary authors. Palauhniuk's characteristic use of this technique in *Adjustment Day* seems to support Dawson's perspective: "I want to suggest that the contemporary revival of omniscience in fact represents a further development and refinement of some of the technical experiments of postmodern fiction. I want to further argue that the reworking of omniscience in contemporary fiction can be understood as one way in which authors have responded to a perceived decline in the cultural authority of the novel over the last two decades" (Dawson 2009: 144).

[12] "Structurally", Palahniuk tells Paul Semel, "*The Grapes of Wrath* has always enchanted me. As has [Ray Bradbury's] *The Martian Chronicles*. Both books interweave on-going plots with one-time anecdotes and overall, grand observations of the environment. When I learned that Ray Bradbury had patterned his Chronicles after the Steinbeck book, I couldn't wait to use the same structure to create a chronicle for my own big, rambling epic" (Semel 2018).

endorsed by Reynolds's followers has resulted in an authoritarian monolithic regime. However, the use of this strategy may be also understood as a response to some academics who argued that the political implications in *Fight Club* were dangerous because they seemed to support Tyler Durden's radical views, which attracted the favor of many young men around the world. As a result, they set up actual fight clubs and thought of violence as an answer to their social plights. In effect, there seems to be an ironic caveat in *Adjustment Day* against some critics who, following the success of *Fight Club*, understood Palahniuk's novel in radically different terms, classifying it either as fascist homophobic or as anti-capitalist anarchist. Even some prestigious academics read the ideological implications of his novel and of its film adaptation in diverse ways. Thus, Henry Giroux thought that the film could act "pedagogically" to train viewers to be sadistic misogynists (2001: 22-25, see also Giroux and Szeman 2000/2001). However, Slavoj Žižek considered that Fincher's adaptation of Palahniuk's novel might have been described as a fascist film but that its message was "not so much liberating violence but that liberation hurts" (in Rasmussen 2004, see also Wilsey-Cleveland 2011). In the case of *Adjustment Day*, where focalization becomes internal and multiple, the narrator's report occupies a substantial part of the narrative but it combines with views and characteristics that belong to each specific focalizer. That is to say, the narrator's voice mixes with each focalizer's time, location, and emotions in the mode denominated "narrated monologue," which fundamentally produces an impression of proximity between narrator, focalizer, and reader (see Cohn 1978: 99-126). Thus, by producing such mixed approach to the experience of knowing, this stylistic strategy also contrasts with Reynolds's inflexible endeavor to rebuild the categorical barriers of traditional ideologies. Furthermore, despite Palahniuk's comments about the issue, Steinbeck's use of this strategy in *The Grapes of Wrath* differs ideologically from the use the younger writer does of the technique in *Adjustment Day*. Steinbeck makes his heterodiegetic narrator delegate focalization mostly on members of the Joad family and the collectivity of migrants, thus clearly siding with their fight to get decent living conditions while, at the same time, denouncing the cruel behavior of the wealthy Californians and the police forces. However, Palahniuk uses different internal focalizers who also differ in their political views, thus avoiding one-sided ideological implications. In fact, by using a single narrative voice combined with a plurality of internal focalizers, in *Adjustment Day* the author is not only rejecting the authoritarian or static position of the omniscient narrator figure that characterized classic realism (as frequently found in the fiction written by Charles Dickens, William Thackeray or Anthony Trollope). He is also recuperating the transgressive ethos of his early fiction; by deploying the technique of narrated monologue, the narrative voice does not only merge the different narratological levels—story, narration, and [readers' response to the] text—but it also invites readers to compare focalizations that are ideologically antagonistic, making their contrastive views obvious, as the following examples show.

In the first case, focalizer Charlie—the Caucasia white chieftain—is having second thoughts about Reynolds' revolution and the new racial balance that it has brought about:

> It felt as if the white race had lost its way. It no longer had blacks and queers to feel superior to so a key source of its pride was gone. […] In the absence of queers and blacks, Charlie and his fellow whites had lost their motivation to live superior lives. Without underlings to dazzle, the white ethno state seemed to be floundering. […] The white race had met its every challenge. Could they make the grass greener? Make the trains run more exactly on schedule? (Palahniuk 2018: 190-191)

The second quotation shows the omniscient narrative voice reproducing Blacktopian chieftain Jamal's prejudiced focalization of the situation in Gaysia and in Caucasia:

> Gays, who'd lived such gadabout and footloose lives, in Gaysia they were yoked to the national campaign for reproduction. […] And women had lost all control over their reproductive rights. […] Citizens of Caucasia were no better off. Where they'd excelled in science, they now banned it. They'd turned their focus to Jeffersonian agriculture and reinstating a white-European culture. The great metropolises of Caucasia had swiftly declined into deadly no-go zones where displaced liberal-arts majors stalked each other as food. (249-250)

Earlier in the non-chronological narrative, Walter's focalization ponders on Reynolds's ideas on racial discrimination before commencing the recruitment of the future revolutionaries at a support group meeting:

> To whom to offer the world? Which man to radicalize? […] Talbott had warned him. The whites would blame the blacks. The blacks would blame the whites. And everyone would blame the Jews. […] Before the group could stop him, he'd announced: "I'm looking to recruit men who'd rule the world in less than a year. […] Anyone interested in being a founding member of a new ruling class, please see me outside." And Walter […] stepped out the door, walked up the stairs, and he'd waited in the alley for a hero or a fool or for no one to follow him. (225)

The categorical ideology postulated by Talbott Reynolds's book and the subsequent revolution carried out by the new generation of American men represents the radical return to traditional social and gender structures whose rigid effects Palahniuk questions explicitly by resorting to the satire, as well as stylistically by deploying his use of the narrated monologue mode. Thus, the *objective* truth pursued by traditional humanism, represented here by Reynolds's totalitarianism but also by radical liberal revisionists, is kept at bay by the author's strategy of using multiple and sometimes contradictory focalizing positions that point to the absurdity of political radicalisms and the need to keep social balance by means of negotiation.

5. CONCLUSION: ADJUSTING THE MIDDLE TO FIT REALITY

At the end of the twentieth century, Palahniuk's *Fight Club* already sided with those who denounced the apparent failure of the postmodern project and its turning to pure capitalist and consumerist practices. However, in *Adjustment Day* the writer

does not simply aim at going back to previous non-categorical positions but he contextualizes his critique of contemporary politics in the new clash for power represented by two political positions that only have in common the radicalized and categorical defense each of them makes of its views against the other. Thus, by focusing on the power and traps that narratives pose, his novel warns readers against the risks of falling back into populist categorical experiments. Likewise, Palahniuk denounces the policies brought about by political correctness and its new authoritarian bias. In this sense, his novel shows a certain level of agreement with present critical reactions against the politics of cultural intolerance disguised as *political correctness* (see *A Letter on Justice and Open Debate* 2020). In addition, the writer's caveats about the power that narrative and information hold make of *Adjustment Day* a book that shares with other, non-satirical recent fiction the authorial necessity to put the emphasis on language, narrative, and the processes of representation as the most important means we have to experience the world. As Robert McLaughlin argues in his analysis of post-postmodern fiction, the better we understand how these tools operate to represent the world, "the better we can disengage them from the institutions that encourage the cynical despair that perpetuates the status quo and claim them for our own purposes" (2004: 67).

Aware of the critical need to evaluate present political radicalisms, Palahniuk builds a stylistic artifact in *Adjustment Day* that helps to clarify the ethical symbolism of his satirical story. Accordingly, by the end of the book, readers are informed that Talbott Reynolds has started an erratic life as a crazy old man amidst the ruins of the city he has helped to destroy (Palahniuk 2018: 307-08). In parallel, the writer describes the situation in which the other main characters of the story stand, to offer in his novel a clear anti-categorical solution that may serve to avoid the entrapments of political radicalisms. Even Dawson, the white leader who finds Ramantha, "the PhD gal" (2018: 244), when she is trying to escape certain death because she teaches Gender Studies, offers some hope for a better future due to his very lack of resolution. Certainly, the end of the book does not clarify if the white chieftain finally kills Ramantha to comply with Reynolds' law, or helps her to escape. However, the uncertain situation in which these two characters remain forever represents a symbolic open window for the return of that negotiated middle that categorical thinking has excluded from the American political arena. As happens to Schrödinger's cat, at the end of the novel Ramantha may be dead or may be alive due to Dawson's indecision. Hers becomes a condition of undecidability that finally outweighs Reynolds's categorical and authoritarian views. In a clearly deconstructive passage that brings echoes again from Borges's narrative entrapments and Baudrillard's orders of simulacra, the narrator, with Dawson as focalizer, offers a reflection on Ramantha that serves a double political purpose. First, it may remind readers of the rhetorically dangerous positions defended by liberal academics who practice an immature and antagonizing form of cultural criticism. Secondly, it also serves to criticize Reynolds's populist and totalitarian politics: the professor of Gender Studies had "risen to power by repeating the opinions of people who'd repeated the opinions of people who'd repeated the opinions of people. If that wasn't a lineage equal to and just as corrupt as the lineages of Adjustment Day,

Dawson didn't know jack" (Palahniuk 2018: 244). In other words, neither left nor right, both critical and populist radicalisms have to be avoided because they always end building their support on essentialist and circular arguments whose ethical authority can never be established. In addition, Reynolds's fight against the class, race, and gender theories that since the 1960s contested the suffocating limits of Eurocentric humanism, openly contradicts the aims that Palahniuk defended for his own transgressive fiction as soon as he became a public figure. As the author already stated in *Stranger Than Fiction*,

> [Y]ou can make what Kierkegaard called your Leap of Faith, where you stop living as a reaction to circumstances and start living as a force for what you say should be.
> What's coming is a million new reasons to go ahead.
> What's going out is the cathartic transgressive novel. (2004: 215)

The strategic use of an unknown omniscient narrator fits Paul Dawson's observation on contemporary fiction that "[n]arrative form here is not determined by any sense of formal unity, by the categories of narrative theory, but by the writer's authority as a reporter of contemporary culture" (2009: 157). The fact that different internal focalizers filter this omniscient reporter's words indubitably helps the author to build an image of present society as absurd and radicalized. As shown by such authorial use of voice and focalization, opposing categorical views are to blame for the current situation. As a result, the novel finally advocates for turning back to a sense of community to recuperate the hope for a better future. At the end of the book old friends, till then separated in the three new countries that resulted from the former United States, meet again and get ready to share a meal. Thus, in post-postmodern times Palahniuk announces the necessity to recuperate a democracy of the people where everyone can talk and defend their viewpoints. Symbolically, the meeting of the group of protagonist-focalizers who have been able to break different rules and escape from their allotted territories happens at the borderlands existing between the three nations, away from the mass media and social nets that might interfere in their relations. There Charm, Gavin, Jamal, Felix, and Shasta meet, in a new kind of "support group," around a campfire and recount their experiences (Palahniuk 2018: 308-10). Hence, the novel reestablishes an anti-categorical ethos that goes beyond clear-cut ideological limits. Talbott Reynolds's experiment has proven to be a failure, bringing back into the open accelerated manifestations of racism, male chauvinism, slavery, misery, and a war among the new states.

Thematically, the writer's satirical and transgressive representation of an American dystopia certainly makes of *Adjustment Day* an ideological extension of *Fight Club*. Although this time Palahniuk's work has not led to any hyperreal creation, as was the case with his first novel, the book invites readers to ponder about a very important social issue; in the new society of information, where the power of narratives has become so evident, information needs to be checked, contrasted, and discussed. Clearly returning to the aims of the counterculture and to the early postmodern revolution, *Adjustment Day* surpasses the individual opinions

of its antagonistic characters, *liberal* critics and fascists alike, to remind its readers that people, as happens to information, are never static and that adversaries always need to negotiate. As Gloria Anzaldúa already contended thirty years earlier, "the answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts" (1987: 80). The ultimate implications of *Adjustment Day* demand, again, the healing of such damaging split.

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