

# The Phenomenon of Propaganda as Reflected in Victor Pelevin's novel *S.N.U.F.F.*

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## Abstract

In this paper, we set out to analyse how modern cultural trends in Russia are reflected in Viktor Pelevin's novel *S.N.U.F.F.* Propaganda as a phenomenon of public life is gaining increasing importance in Russian politics and Russian culture. We aim to investigate this phenomenon within the framework of propaganda mechanisms as defined by Jose Antonio Maravall, who has described the cultural mechanisms of the Baroque epoch. We will compare this interpretation with the image of modern Russian society as presented in Pelevin's novel. Referring to Pelevin's text, we attempt to demonstrate how concepts such as novelty, spectacle, theatricality, and secrecy are utilised to subjugate and control the will of the spectator. We will also consider how the text in itself is a reaction to this phenomenon.

*Key words:* Pelevin, *S.N.U.F.F.*, Maravall, propaganda, baroque, neobaroque, novelty.

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This paper aims to establish the connection between the phenomenon of propaganda as described in Viktor Pelevin's novel *S.N.U.F.F.* and the its influences on the current political situation in modern Russia. At the same time, it will be shown how the mechanisms of political influence of art, stemming from the Baroque period, find their expression in the novel.

Viktor Pelevin is admittedly one of most popular writers in modern Russia.<sup>1</sup> His novels are usually based in fiction but draw heavily on various philosophical systems and concepts. The latter feature, however, does not diminish his popularity with a wide base of readers. On the contrary, the blend of fictional and philosophical approaches in his novels make his observations on the realities of modern Russia ever more effective and vivid. His books are perceived by many critics as hard-hitting satire (Murikov 2012, Bezrukavaya 2014, Plehanova 2013) and social commentary while some of his readers find in them prophetic revelations. For example, in the novel *S.N.U.F.F.*, published in 2011, his readers found a prediction of Russia's hybrid war with Ukraine (renamed in the novel as "Urkaina") which started three years after the book was published. One of the focal points of *S.N.U.F.F.* is the ideological indoctrination which is achieved through a combination of different influences exerted on the society by mass media and art. This process can be observed in modern Russia, where government influence extend not only to the state-controlled media, but also to wider culture.<sup>2</sup>

The Culture Ministry of the Russian Federation promotes Russian films (those which do not contain criticism and satire) and restricts foreign produced films from entering the Russian market. In 2018 the ministry backed a law limiting the percentage of foreign films shown in Russian cinemas (Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation 2019). Vladimir Medinskiy, the Culture Minister, in his interview concerning the Second World War said that one should see truth in a myth, thus questioning the possibility of an objective historical approach and postulating the relativity of history, claiming that it is only a matter of interpretation by historians (Medinsky 2017, 11).

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<sup>1</sup> Viktor Pelevin debuted in 1991 with a short stories collection called "Blue Lantern", which combined certain nostalgic sentiments for his youth in the Soviet Union with an abstract and allegoric interpretation of the realities of that period. In 1997 Pelevin published his apparently most popular novel "Chapayev and Void" – the work in which the timelines of Russian revolutionary period of 1917, Civil War and "Perestroika" – the period after the fall of the Soviet Union – become intricately intertwined. The novel is saturated with references to Buddhist and classical philosophy. Nowadays Pelevin's diction, his unique style, dialogical and didactical spirit of his prose are instantly recognisable to every Russian reader.

<sup>2</sup> The Monumental Art sponsored by the government includes not only films but other forms of art. The 17-meter-tall monument of Vladimir the Great – the newly created symbol of statehood – erected in Moscow in 2016 is one such example.

The connection between Baroque and modernity is considered in the works of contemporary philosophers and literary theorists. The term “Neo-Baroque”, describing this connection, was first devised by the Spanish philosopher Xavier Rubert de Ventos, and was subsequently used by other researchers, e. g. by Omar Calabrese (1992) in his book *Neo-Baroque: a Sign of the Time* and by Greg Lambert (2004) in *The Return of the Baroque in Modern Culture*. Lambert speaks of the features shared by modern times and the Baroque period. He quotes William Egginton – literary critic and philosopher – who described cultural spectacle and psychological manipulation:

The methods of the new alliance [between the fields of politics and culture] were, in fact, akin in many ways to the kind of psychological manipulation we encounter today in everything from advertisement to nationalist propaganda, in that their purpose is to have their target audience form a ‘passionate attachment’ to a particular version of the world. (ibid, 29)

The negative connotations of the term *propaganda*<sup>3</sup>, as well as the term itself, find their origin in the twentieth century, but the phenomenon of propaganda itself is associated with the period of the Counter-Reformation when the Catholic Church embarked on an ideological war with Protestantism. Special techniques (including meditation), combinations of visual images, light and sound as well as rhetorical devices were developed by Ignatius de Loyola. Many artists subsequently took a close interest in Loyola’s practices, in particular, the great Soviet film director and theorist Sergei Eisenstein.

Another researcher, whose opinion bears significance for the subject discussed in this article, is Jose Antonio Maravall, a Spanish historian and philosopher. He gives a definition of Baroque art and puts it into the context of the era. While describing Baroque art, Maravall proposes the term “extreme” (Maravall 1996, 210) but he is using this adjective in a very specific way. According to Maravall,

Baroque authors could allow themselves to be carried away by exuberance or could hold to a severe simplicity. Either served their ends equally. To appear baroque, the use of one or the other required the fulfillment of no more than one condition: that in both cases abundance or simplicity take place in the extreme. In the extreme: this was one means of psychological action on people, one that was closely bound to the assumptions and goals of the baroque. (ibid)

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<sup>3</sup> Even the term “propaganda” itself can be traced back to the Baroque period, when Roman Catholic Church created a new administrative body – Congregatio Propaganda de Fide, – with a goal of spreading the Catholic faith and counteracting the Reformation.

Maraval describes Baroque culture as “violent” (ibid), not just because of the actual violence present in it, but because of its capacity to create extreme tension in the spectator. The qualities ascribed by the contemporaries to Baroque art were “terribleness” in the sense of “what grandiosely attracts us with an irresistible force in whatever we are viewing.” (ibid), and magnificence with an equal capacity for impressing audiences: “the baroque ceased imitating, lost restraint, took pleasure in the terrible, and sought to cultivate the extreme, all to impress a public more forcefully and with greater freedom.” (ibid)

Baroque art served absolute monarchies and nobilities of the 16<sup>th</sup> century supporting their status through the means of newly emerging media. The notion of novelty characteristic to Baroque art was also present in the Renaissance, but in the epoch of the Baroque, novelty was “limited to poetic game playing” (ibid, 227) and employing “literary outlandishness, and trick effects machinated on stage” (ibid). This feature was also designed to impress audiences and inspire awe in them.

Before we begin with our analysis, it is appropriate to provide a short summary of Pelevin’s novel *S.N.U.F.F.* In this novel, the world is divided into two parts – BYZANTIUM and URKAINA. BYZANTIUM is the civilisation of people who live in a flying city – the last remnant of human civilisation. Although technologically advanced, the people living in BYZANTIUM are morally corrupt and incapable of any progress. The people who live under the flying city call themselves Orcs and are far more primitive in comparison to the population of BYZANTIUM. Both civilizations are in a state of official war but in reality, they exist side by side and even interact with each other. The plot of novel centres on a young Orc, Grimm, who is taken into the upper city by a pilot of a battle camera, Demilola. Grimm develops a relationship with Kaya, Demilola’s mechanical doll. In Byzantium, Grimm understands that all his notions of Orcish culture and history are invented by the people of Byzantium and that the war waged between the Orcs and the people functions only as a tradition and a kind of a sacrifice to Manitou – the god of the people. Grimm and Kaya manage to escape and join the rebels – the people in the woods outside BYZANTIUM and URKAINA. The book ends with Demilola’s diary relating that the Orcs managed to blow up the anchors of the flying city and it is falling down. Demilola decides to stay in the city and meet his end there.

It seems evident that the features of Baroque art mentioned above can be applied to the description of art in Pelevin’s novel *S.N.U.F.F.* Here, the fictional post-apocalyptic world is divided into two civilisations: the people of BYZANTIUM, technologically advanced but morally corrupt, and the Orcs – a medieval and primitive civilisation. It is important to note that in the absence of any apparent physiological differences between the people of BYZANTIUM and the Orcs, the Byzantines still perceive themselves as

a different race. One of the focal points of the book are S.N.U.F.F.s – movies which are produced by the people but are also watched by the Orcs. S.N.U.F.F. is the main source of information both for the people and the Orcs. The novel is rich in neologisms and wordplay and “S.N.U.F.F.” is one them. The book mentions the original meaning of the abbreviation S.N.U.F.F. – “порнофильм с заснятым на пленку настоящим убийством” (Пелевин 2012, 360; a porn movie with a real killing shot on film; Pelevin 2015, 283). At the same time, it acquires a new one – “Special Newsreel/Universal Feature Film” (Пелевин 2012, 359). The abbreviation receives a philosophical explanation, as the reader is presented with the dichotomy “special and universal”. A different kind of dichotomy is present in the structure of snuffs whereby one half of each film is filled with sexually explicit scenes, while the other contains footages of war and real killings.

С.Н.А.Ф.Ф. – это сама жизнь где в числителе любовь, а в знаменателе смерть. Такая дробь одновременно равна и нулю и бесконечности – как и взыскующий ее Маниту. (ibid, 294)

S.N.U.F.F. is life itself, with love in numerator and death in denominator – a fraction that is simultaneously equal to zero and infinity – as is Manitou, who thirsts avidly for this. (Pelevin 2015, 232)

One can recognise here the features characteristic of Baroque art, albeit in apparently fictionalised and satirised form. Both extremes can be observed: sex scenes and real killings are combined in one work of art and produce tension which captivates viewers. Such interpretation is confirmed by the reaction of a young Orc watching snuffs:

С точки зрения монтажа или сюжета снаффы были примитивнее и проще, чем фильмы древности. Но смотреть их было куда интереснее – и самый скучный снафф захватывал сильнее, чем самый увлекательный фильм. (Пелевин 2012, 363)

From the point of view of editing or storyline, the snuffs were more primitive than films of ancient times. But they were far more interesting to watch – and the most boring snuff was far more gripping than the most absorbing film. (Pelevin 2015, 285)

The snuffs in Pelevin’s book have a similar structure but differ in details and mise en scène. They resemble a play where the scene is always the same, but the sets and costumes are constantly changing. Tellingly, the place where pre-planned war would take place is called a Circus. The process of war between the humans and the Orcs is turned into one spectacle.

На каждую войну орки надевали новую форму, часто несколько ее разновидностей. Были войны туник, войны шорт, войны черных кожаных упряжей и войны строгих костюмов. Были войны похожие на гей парады, и войны, напоминающие их разгон. У людей одежда менялась не так сильно, зато на каждую войну они выходили с новым оружием и машинами. (Пелевин 2012, 361)

For every war the Orcs donned a new uniform, often in several versions. There were wars of classical tunics, wars of shorts, wars of black leather harnesses and wars of formal suits. There were wars that looked like gay parades and wars that looked like these parades were being dispersed. The people clothes didn't change so greatly but on the other hand they entered every war with new weapons and machines. (Pelevin 2015, 285)

Here it is important to mention one specific feature of Baroque spectacle which can be compared to the description of snuffs in Pelevin's novel. Fiesta – a series of performances held by Spanish monarchs and nobility in 17<sup>th</sup> century – is strongly reminiscent of snuffs. Fiestas, as well as snuffs, can contain a variety of themes. They had to rely on some form of invention, be it “an ingenious mechanism, an unusual artifact, an architectonic construction that, with a pasteboard and the wood or similar materials, an impressive grandeur (the more fragile the materials, the more amazing the effects obtained with them).” (Maravall 1996, 227). For example, at the Spanish court, in preparations for fiestas, pools, channels, ships, and gondolas would be constructed just to imitate a naval battle. This naval battle would be held several times so that a maximum number of spectators could participate in the proceedings. It is possible to compare fiestas to the theatrical war which is happening in the Circus of Pelevin's novel. Although the murders in those wars are real, everything else, as it is in fiestas, is staged. The machinery and constructions deployed in snuffs are similar to those used in fiestas. This is illustrated in the description of the sets depicting war:

Крепостная стена выглядела нелепо. Это, скорее, был узкий дом без окон, украшенный зубцами на крыше. Для стены он был слишком толст, для здания слишком тонок. Видимо это был «фрагмент фортификации» или «элемент замка» (Пелевин 2012, 361)

The fortress wall looked ridiculous. It was more like narrow house without any windows, with decorative battlements on the roof. It was too thick for a wall and too thin for a building. It was probably 'fragment of fortification' or an 'element of the castle' (Pelevin 2015, 117)

One can also draw a parallel to the concept of novelty which is so important in Baroque art. Everchanging costumes and war machines can be perceived as forms of “novelty” which are designed to impress the viewer, akin to the mechanisms of poetic game and the trick effects employed in Baroque spectacles. Snuffs are not the only cases where the concept of novelty finds its application. The spectacles shown to the Orcs before the military engagements can also be viewed as such. The characters participating in this spectacle are created to appeal to the sense of novelty in the Orcs, even though the whole process is repeated before each war. The characters are introduced to the Orcs in different costumes before every war. The change of costumes is determined by the mood of the crowd. “Видимо, власть поняла настроение толпы. Теперь из палатки выходили только герои одетые по оркскому обычаю. Имена им оставили тоже оркские.” (Пелевин 2012, 114) – “The authorities have clearly understood the mood of the crowd. Now all the Orcs that came out of the tent were dressed according to Orcish custom. They were left with their Orcish name, too.” (Pelevin 2015, 91) The author also describes the impact this spectacle produces on the crowd of Orcs viewing it on the plaza. The Orcs are greatly impressed when presented with primitive wooden blocks representing humans: “Чурбаны для битвы отражали не столько облик врага сколько муки художника, пытающегося изобразить несколько непохожих лиц” (Пелевин 2012, 111) – “[R]ather than reflecting the appearance of the enemies, the wooden blocks depicted the torments of the artist to depict several faces that looked different from each other” (Pelevin 2015, 88). It should be mentioned that even such crude depiction has a strong impact on the Orcs. Presented with this kind of imagery, they react in a most emotional way: Pelevin illustrates this effect by describing the emotional reaction of the young Orc Grimm, one of the protagonists of the book. Grimm is filled with deep repulsion at the sight of the crudely made wooden dolls.

Враги, конечно, выглядели гнусно. Особенно раздражали кресты и звезды, которыми они наверняка награждали друг друга за убийство орков, чья цивилизация издавна развивалась по духовному пути и не разработала поэтому таких средств уничтожения, как у приземленно-материалистических людей. (Пелевин 2012, 111)

The enemies, of course, looked repulsive. The crosses and stars were especially infuriating – they had probably awarded them to each other for killing Orcs, whose civilization, from ancient times, had developed along a spiritual path and hadn’t therefore, devised the same means of destruction as the calculating and materialistic upper people had. (Pelevin 2015, 90)

He compares the “духовность” (spirituality) of the Orcs to the “приземленно-материалистической” (calculating and materialistic) nature of humans. Of more significance to our analysis is the description of the protagonist’s state of mind:

Грым не то чтобы думал все это – он, скорее, понимал, что орк должен так думать (вернее, если совсем уж точно – должен понимать, что должен так думать), но эти долженствования возникали на периферии ума и уходили в небытие, не затронув его существа. То же самое, он был уверен, происходило на площади и со всеми остальными. (Пелевин 2012, 112)

Grimm didn’t exactly think all this – he merely realized that orc ought to think like that (or rather, to be exactly precise, ought to understand that he ought to think like that, but these thoughts of obligation arose on the periphery of his mind and retreated into non-existence without impinging on his essential being. He was sure that the same thing was happening to everyone else in the square. (Pelevin 2015, 88–89)

This description presents an example of the influence exercised upon the minds of the spectators. The crude and primitive imagery presented to the Orcs evokes deep feelings of resentment and drives them to conclusions which have no logical grounding. This seems to be the perfect expression of one of the main features of Baroque art as Maravall described it. “We already know that the baroque placed little trust in strictly intellectual arguments, in Scholastic thought shaped by traditional society [...] It preferred to appeal to extrarational means that moved the will.” (Maravall 1996, 228) Orcish nationality also fulfils a role in this spectacle, as it is also an artifice. Orcish culture, history, and language are all artificially created and serve as a means of control over the population. Thus, an Orcish identity is created and upon seeing spectacle such as presentation of heroes before the war, the Orcs start to think as they ought to.

- Орков придумали потом
- Не завирайся – нахмурилась Хлоя – как можно придумать целый народ? Древнейший народ?
- Придумали не ваши тела – ответил дискурсмонгер – а вашу культуру и историю. В том числе представление о том, что вы древнейший народ.

(Пелевин 2012, 200)



- ‘Orcs were invented afterwards.’
- ‘Don’t tell lies,’ Chloe said with a frown. ‘How can you invent an entire nation? Most ancient nation’
- ‘They didn’t invent your bodies,’ the discoursemonger replied, ‘but your culture and history.’

(Pelevin 2015, 158)

The other parallel that can be drawn between Baroque culture and the world created in Viktor Pelevin’s novel involves the concept of truth. The Byzantium intellectuals, people who are producing snuffs, have a very interesting definition of the relationship between power and truth. The concept is described by one of the characters – a snuff creator:

*Сила всегда в силе. И ни в чем другом. В древних фильмах говорили: «сила там, где правда». Так и есть, они всегда рядом. Но не потому, что сила приходит туда, где правда. Это правда приползает туда, где сила.* (Пелевин 2012, 197)

*Power always lies in power. In the Ancient Films they used to say “power is where truth is.” And that’s the way it is, they always come together. But not because power goes to where truth is. It’s the truth that crawls over to where power is.* (Pelevin 2015, 87)

People’s hypocrisy and their obsession with the relationship between truth and power can be directly compared to the mannerism movement and the perception of power in art described by Maravall. While describing the mannerist approach, Maravall presumes that the followers of mannerism are more concerned with “appearance” and “manner” than with “truth” and that this idea can be applied to the Baroque in “the highest degree” (Maravall 1996, 215). Mannerists used their knowledge of this correlation in order to manipulate and were tempted to exploit the power which this dissymmetry offered. The idea of the striking superiority of appearance over substance and even the tendency to replace one with the other seems to be one of the common themes in the description of the society of humans in Byzantium. Often, it assumes extreme forms like in the “Don’t look, don’t see” rule, where a crime is not punished unless it was shown on the news and presented to the public (Пелевин 2012, 55, 205). The high emphasis placed on “appearance” and “manner” becomes evident in the ways in which people in power behave themselves. They too are creating a spectacle in their everyday life. The description of the feminist Albina-Libertina, a high-ranking priestess in society of Byzantium, at the point where she introduces herself to a visitor is an excellent example:

*Когда я вошел в ее кабинет – а он у нее реально большой без всякой 3D-подвески, – она в черной мантии стояла под вытяжкой у настенного алтаря и делала вид, что гадает по внутренностям оркского младенца.*  
(Пелевин 2012, 203)

*When I walked into the office – and it's a genuinely big office, even without any 3D-backlighting – she was standing under the air extraction hood at the altar, wearing a black cloak and pretending to be divining with the entrails of an Orcish infant.* (Pelevin 2015, 161–162)

The intention to impress the subordinates or the wider public, to be obscure and mysterious is also described by Maravall. He quotes that the advice given to the rulers were “secrecy, suspense and imposing forces of majesty by extrarational means” (Maravall 1996, 217). Here, parallels are drawn between a secular monarch and a figure of god: “The secrecy of the Prince makes him more closely resemble God and, consequently, gains him majesty and reverence, puts his vassals in a state of suspense, perturbs his enemies” (ibid, 217).

The society of people is also a theocracy, with their divinity *Manitou* – the word-play derived from the words “monitor” and “money”. The priests of Manitou, who are holding positions of power in human society, use their appearance in the same way as Spanish monarchs, linking their mysterious appearance to that of god, and deriving their authority from this connection.

Today, it becomes increasingly difficult to ignore the importance of the phenomenon of propaganda which appears to penetrate our consciousness and affect all areas of life.

In the present article, the phenomenon of propaganda as described in Pelevin’s novel *S.N.U.F.F.* was analysed in its relation to Baroque culture. Showing the dialectics of the interplay between the object and the subject of propaganda as described in *S.N.U.F.F.*, we argue that in Pelevin’s case “the author is not dead”. We clearly sense the author’s stance and his belief, in spite of the immense power of propaganda, in the existence of the metaphysical truth. This attitude does not correlate with the postulates of postmodernism and the idea of absolute relativity. It seems to us that such position determines to some extent the enormous popularity of Pelevin’s novels and his playful and powerful didactic spirit.

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