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## SUBMISSION TO THE UNCANNY. WHY DOES HOUELLEBECQ'S PROSE PROVOKE DISCOMFORT IN THE MEDIA AND PUBLIC SPACE?

Since his first appearance on the European literary scene, Michel Houellebecq has not stopped dividing the media and the public alike. Literary criticism has repeatedly emphasized the controversy of his prose, in which, among other things, reactionism, racism, misogyny, misanthropy, vulgarity, populism, nihilism, and cynicism are frequently recognized. The paper analyzes what the media that form the public opinion, which also constitute academia communication channels, recognize as offensive in Houellebecq's prose. The starting point of the paper is that the contemporary culture faces the uncanny emerging from his prose with great uneasiness.

**Key words:** Houellebecq, the Real, culture, ethics, and politics of narration

Indubitably one of the most knowledgeable analysts of Michael Houellebecq's opus, Marinko Koščec, has titled the introductory text of his multidisciplinary study *Mirakul, mučenik, manipulator?* (*Michael H.— Miracle, Martyr, Manipulator?*) as "The Houellebecq Phenomenon: A Text Lost in Media Reflections." By virtue of this para-textual gesture, he obviously tried to warn against the fact that a media representation of the Houellebecq phenomenon in cultural studies has already eclipsed his texts. The sense and effects of Houellebecq's novels have been lost in a deafening media chatter. That noise has reversely formed the Houellebecq phenomenon and the public relation to his opus. In that sense, a literary critical and academic reception has lagged behind the media one, which has, and it should be mentioned, been mostly unequal. In this paper, we will not deal with the etiology of irreconcilable media or academic critiques of Houellebecq's prosaic texts or with the fascination of the numerous translations of his prose in foreign languages; we will instead deal with what is being recognized as pathological, hyperbolic, and disturbing in his prose, what the modern Western cultures indubitably find increasingly harder to digest.

The New Age Western societies have traditionally been based on rationality and responsibility as characteristics of a civic behavior. Citizens, subordinated to a cognitively organized law and obligation of material acquisition, are formed as individuals who are able to discern reality from illusion. However, in her study titled *Culture and the Real: Theorizing Cultural Criticism* (2005), Catherine Belsey asked whether a westernized, that is, a capitalist behavior is a natural one. She noted that a modern cultural theory has disputed the conventional Western viewpoint, our Western behavior, and relation to the other as self-understandable and unproblematic.<sup>1</sup> Belsey follows Lacan's idea of the Real as something that does not depend on its own representation of real life. Lacan's Real, claims Belsey, should not be misinterpreted as reality, but it does not imply that the Real does not exist. It is an inexpressible experience in the Western culture, something that escapes our knowledge, which finds it so intolerable that it cannot be named. Following her Lacanian theses, we try to demonstrate in this paper that the effects of the Real, which the Western cultures cannot face, surface in Houellebecq's prose as a realistic threat to an established *weltanschauung* and public opinion.

Critics generally agree that Houellebecq interprets the symbolic order of the Western culture as a sort of a paradox. He spots and represents all of its controversies; the simultaneity of progressive and devaluating effects of liberal democracy, the glorification and disputation of mercantile or sexual liberalism and multiculturalism, the establishment and debilitation of the legitimacy of the humanist discourse, the disintegration of familial values and insistence thereupon, societal spectacularization, the omnipresent profit ideology and ever-growing conservatism. It is because he incorporates what the Western culture finds dubious, inexpressible, weird and pathogenic into his prosaic texts that the reader-citizen finds them repulsive, producing discomfort that can be put down not only to his texts only but also to the personality of the author, as noted by a reporter of the *Le Point* magazine, Denis Demonpion.<sup>2</sup>

It comes as no surprise that Houellebecq's sixth novel, *Submission*, has again caused discomfort in the public and media scope. Yet, as emphasized by Koščec, the discovery and the unambiguous articulation of the uncanny in the Western culture is almost equally valid for the entire opus: "Due to an opulence of materials in which both a biographic origin and the symptoms of a collective pathology are being recognized, he stages the aversely seen dimensions of modern France and of a broader consciousness of the Western man. The middle class he focuses upon is uncultivated, nonchalant, egoistic, inclined to xenophobia, racism, and hatred to everything it does not understand, deprived of moral strongholds and hopes for the future." (Koščec, 2007:197). The majority of the interested expert audience holds an opinion that a direct motivation to the readers to take *Submission* in their hands was the scandalous massacre in the editorial room of the *Charlie Hebdo* satirical magazine, in addition to all of

1 Cf. Belsey, 2005:3.

2 In his preface to Houellebecq's biography, Demonpion has, *inter alia*, also written the following: "They said he was a reactionary, a fascist, a Stalinist. He has inspired and is still inspiring repulsion like few authors before him. (...) With Houellebecq, always on the edge but aware of the danger of crossing it, a discomfort has set in already in his second novel." Demonpion, 2005:10.

the European social realities that Houellebecq did not keep secret from the readers. As a matter of fact, it occurred on the same day the novel was published in the Flammarion edition. A coincidence or not, Houellebecq's caricature as Nostradamus was published on the very last cover page of *Charlie Hebdo*. Therefore, these material circumstances have certainly contributed to a more penetrative reception of *Submission*. The novel was instantly declared controversial in the media.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, we believe that what makes it controversial is primarily the fact that its plot repeats the effect of the Real in the Western culture and, in a way, renders it visible.

If we follow the idea that *Submission* reiterates everything that is embarrassing and shameful for the Western culture and that its narration functions as a sort of a reconstruction of social discomfort, it is not insignificant to note that it is exactly in literature that the main Houellebecq's character recognizes a discourse that is able to express the sensation of the Real: "But only literature can put you in touch with another human spirit, as a whole, with all its weaknesses and grandeurs, its limitations, its pettiness, its obsessions, its beliefs; with whatever it finds moving, interesting, exciting or repugnant. Only literature can give you access to a spirit from beyond the grave – a more direct, more complete, deeper access than you'd have in conversation with a friend. Even in our deepest, most lasting friendships, we never speak as openly as when we face a blank page and address a reader we do not know." (Houellebecq, 2015:12-13).

Thus, the question is what appears to be unbearable in *Submission* for a contemporary reader, what erupts in a novelistic projection of the French society and culture in 2022 as anxiety, fear, and neurosis in our quotidian lifestyle. Almost all media representations of the novel have coped with the plot, which has obviously succeeded in causing a sort of a public scandal, even a reaction of the French Prime Minister.<sup>4</sup> What is the key to the performativity of this narration concealed that it even managed to provoke a stance of the highest member of government? It has certainly, in a way, touched upon the Real of the political elite, of a vehemently suppressed political crisis, of a controversial societal transformation and antagonisms that unconsciously control the lives in our communities. The narrative subject of *Submission*, François, is styled as a forty-four-year-old university professor at the Paris Sorbonne, who suspects that, no matter how apolitical he might be, political transformations form his life, though he does not want to be aware of it completely. His status of a mid-aged university professor enables him to satisfy the individual enjoyments of reading, sex, and alcohol. Simultaneously, he develops a defense mechanism and becomes repulsed by anything that might obstruct this enjoyment. In spite of that, he fails to break away from the "threatening" quotidian political context of the forthcoming French presidential elections, which will turn his lifestyle upside down, no matter how hard he tries. What is more, the very suppression of that political atmosphere is something that determines him forcedly. It construes his place in the society and mo-

3 Cf. Bourmeau, 2015.; Johnson, 2015.; Marsh, 2015.

4 Immediately subsequent to the massacre of the editorial staff of the *Charlie Hebdo* satirical magazine, the French Prime Minister Manuel Valls experienced a necessity to be publicly dissociated from Houellebecq's novel, having stated that France is neither Michel Houellebecq nor a country of intolerance and hatred. Cf. Knausgaard, 2015.

dels his relation (as a Western intellectual) toward language/literature, to the woman/Other, or, for instance, to religion plially, like plasticine. Thus, the question is why such a literary construct of a Western intellectual, who obeys to an ideology silently, disregarding its disputable political-ethical impacts, is repulsive and to whom? Some journalists have call the author out because of his allegedly shameful and irresponsible depiction of the projection of a distinguished member of the academia as decadent, considerably nonchalant, and unconcerned for the future of France. For the university professor, the forthcoming presidential election is represented, one may say, as a reality show that promises a little bit of laughter and cynicism from the television screen, and that is why he does not miss it. In the first round, the extreme right-wing candidate Marine Le Pen<sup>5</sup> leads with 33% of the vote as expected, whereby the Muslim Brotherhood and the Socialist Party compete for their entrance in the second round. Following this media soap opera, we learn that in the second round the Socialist Party formed a coalition with the Muslim Brotherhood to prevent the rightists in coming to power. The economy of political elections in a Western democracy is always a sort of manipulation or luring of voters, who are positioned as consumers, seduced by an attraction of merchandise or possibly by envy, vanities, and other ethical extremes. The persona of the university professor François is formulated in such a way that it appears as if he had no election favorite, which is probably also disturbing or terrifying. An intellectual *par excellence* represents free choice in a Western, tolerant, multicultural society as an impossible event. He harbors no faith in reason or in the idea of a scientist, the concept of the enlightenment and the transfer of knowledge, and ultimately in the institution of university as the bearer of national culture. Therefore, he behaves as merely a tacit observer who survives these consumed and entirely exhausted, featureless formats of the French capitalist neoliberal democracy. In the contemporary reality of the French Republic, university teachers are depicted as the propagators of an idea of culture no more, and the mission of a University is obviously no longer connected to the project of realizing a national cultural identity in a Humboldtian way. It is strange that the majority of critics interpret this depiction of the demise of the previous idea of the Western culture as an empty neoliberal concept as Houellebecq's co-opting of the rightist attitudes. It is especially unusual since the narrative subject of the university professor was not modeled as a conventional conservative, but more as a culturally and politically marginalized subject, an atheist who does not believe in any ideological framework offered. François is the author of a doctoral dissertation, extremely recognized in the scientific audience, on a decadent writer, naturalist Joris-Karl Huysmans, who found sense in his life after having been converted to Catholicism. Seduced by his literary and cultural conversion, the narrative subject tries to imitate him, attempting to find a new, adequate model of faith, culture or ideology. In the end, he seems to accept the change in the social system; however, even in a new, modified ideological and religious environment, which is established after the elections (in which the women do not have a place of their own in the labor market; higher education

<sup>5</sup> As already emphasized in the critique, the names of the real French political actors have not diminished narrative ambiguity. Cf. Đerić and Tournois, 2015:286.

is neither compulsory nor reflective of a national culture but directly dependent on the profit of a transnational oil company; Islam is a dominant religion, and monogamy is a matter of the past), it does not seem that the narrative subject really experiences a religious or cultural reversal or that he finds a clear purpose in it.<sup>6</sup>

His position in the society, as well as at the University, is characterized by a cognitive dislocation of a kind: François is never sure what he knows and what he does not know. As a member of the academia, he is a sort of an intruder. He is not accustomed to an institution he works in, and he neither believes in his teaching profession nor receives an existential fulfillment from it. Thus, the question who finds such a representation of an ancient academic institution such as the Paris Sorbonne and its employees traumatic. Probably, it is primarily traumatic to the French academic elite, which may recognize in it the suppressed fears of its own. In other words, François' masochist instinct to *spit into a plate he eats from* as a member of the academia is exactly the reverse side of the destructive masochism of the very community and of the society as a whole. Additionally, François' self-destructive behavior, humiliating for him and for the entire academic West, imposes an issue of the role of Western higher educational institutions in a society, as well as a series of other questions raised in the novel, such as compilation, plagiarism, and sex as legitimate avenues to carving out university careers.<sup>7</sup> The problems are simply multiplying: are the values of the ancient Western universities exhausted in opportunism, pecuniary benefits for university teachers or in a sexual submission to a university administration,<sup>8</sup> and to which extent does politics influence a composition of university administrative instances, the faculty or a multicultural student profile? By means of an ambiguous enactment of the suppressed controversial functioning mechanisms of the aca-

6 The last passage of the novel is entirely compiled in a conditional mood, which necessarily implies the conditions of a conversion that should create *an impression of a free will* of a convertite. (Houellebecq, 2015:359-360). The very rite is depicted as incredible, for the narrative subject should become a Muslim upon his acquisition of a phonetic pronunciation of the holy sentence of enthronement in a new faith. In the very end of the novel, if and when the narrative subject should meet the requirement to be reemployed with the Sorbonne by conversion, it seems as if he does not believe in this new concept but obeys it, as he does not have anything to be sorry for: "A few months later there would be new classes and new students – pretty, veiled, shy. I don't know how students find out which teachers are famous, but they always, inevitably, did, and I didn't think things could be so different now. Each of these girls, no matter how pretty, would be happy and proud if I chose her, and would feel honoured to share my bed. They would be worthy of love; and I, for my part, would come to love them. Rather like my father a few years before, I'd be given another chance; and it would be the chance at a second life, with very little connection to the old one. I would have nothing to mourn." (Houellebecq, 2015:359-360).

7 François' colleague Steve, according to a coffee klatsch by a distinguished Balzac expert, female colleague Marie-Françoise Tanneur, owes his successful university career to an intimate relationship with Madame Vice President. "The advancement of Steve's career at the university, according to Marie-Françoise, was due entirely to the fact that he was eating Big Delouze's pussy. This seemed possible, albeit surprising. With her broad shoulders, her grey crew cut and her courses in 'gender studies', Chantal Delouze, the president of Paris III, had always struck me as a dyed-in-the-wool lesbian, but I could have been wrong, or maybe she bore a hatred towards men that expressed itself in fantasies of domination. Maybe forcing Steve, with his pretty, vapid little face and his long silken curls, to kneel down between her chunky thighs brought her to new and hitherto unknown heights of ecstasy." *Ibid.*, pp. 32f.

8 "For a moment I thought his inner man of the left had been roused, then I reasoned with myself: his inner man of the left was fast asleep, and nothing less than a political shift in the leadership of the French university system could ever rouse him." *Ibid.*, pp. 33f.



demia, without their disapproval or approval, Houellebecq reiterates the culturally uncanny and causes discomfort. The novel's narration opens one of the neuralgic points of the Western society—the life of academic institutions—destructing the values they are based upon. Alluding to the points that Michel Onfray stated in his interview for *Politika*,<sup>9</sup> claiming that a dominant idea of the novel is an individual's submission and collaboration in general, both Gordana Đerić and Laurent Tournois base their interpretation<sup>10</sup> of narrative levels primarily on a collapse of the University and the collaboration or death of intellectuals.

If we again reconsider the beginning of *Submission*, where it is emphasized that literature is capable of catching out the cultural Real, his narration may confront us with the suppressed University in the West, with unpronounceable and paradoxical forces that spout on the fundament of the Western educational system.<sup>11</sup> A subject realizes a sort of a *free life* in an academic and social community only through permanent compromises and submission to the Western university system. Thus, the submission<sup>12</sup> in the novel is enthroned as a template of promise or religiousness in a narrative on a Western university, which, according to Bill Readings, is being developed toward the status of a transnational corporation by a more omnipresent bureaucratization. (Readings, 2016:311). Additionally, in narration, university professor François is not even styled as an uncompromised, ultra-honest academic worker and a highly ethical Western intellectual;<sup>13</sup> he is controversially depicted as the fruit of the *perverted* West and its functioning regime. Though dedicated to his profession and though his academic activity is verified in the society (his dissertation has met excellent with critiques; he has been entrusted with the preparation of Huysmans in the Pléiade edition, one of the greatest collections of French publishing), he fails to justify and excogitate his existence with his own academic work: “The intellectual summits of my life had been completing my dissertation and publishing my book, and that was already more than ten years ago. Intellectual summits? Summits, full stop. In those days, at least, I’d felt justified. Since then I hadn’t produced anything except a few short articles for the Journal of Nineteenth-Century Studies, plus a couple for The Literary Review, when some new book touched on my field of expertise. My articles were clear, incisive and brilliant. They were generally well received, especially since I never missed a deadline. But was that enough to

9 Valčić Lazović, 2015.

10 Cf. the article Đerić and Tournois, 2015:281-298.

11 These paradoxical forces may be illustrated by another example from the novel, where the competences of a Bachelor of Arts in Comparative Literature, becoming a symbolic value-added when competing for a work post of a saleswoman at Celine or Hermes, are ironized.

12 Rediger, as someone who is the President of the new, so-called “Islamic” University and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, claims as follows: “‘It’s submission,’ Rediger murmured. ‘The shocking and simple idea, which had never been so forcefully expressed, that the summit of human happiness resides in the most absolute submission. I hesitate to discuss the idea with my fellow Muslims, who might consider it sacrilegious, but for me there’s a connection between woman’s submission to man, as it’s described in Story of O, and the Islamic idea of man’s submission to God. You see,’ he went on, ‘Islam accepts the world, and accepts it whole. It accepts the world as such, Nietzsche might say.’” (Houellebecq, 2015:310-311).

13 “Anyone who has spent at least a little bit of time at the University knows that it does not pertain to an exemplary club, that there are few communities that are more sarcastic and malicious than the university workers (with an exception being probably the ‘exemplary suburban companies’). However, this story continues.” *Ibid.*, p. 340.

justify a life?" (Houellebecq, 2015:55). His existence cannot even be justified by stable familial emotional relations. Namely, François has not had any contact with his mother and father for ten years,<sup>14</sup> and he is almost undisturbed when learning about his mother's and father's death.<sup>15</sup> What is more, he demonstrates his bewilderment toward the woman who lived with his father up to his demise.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, his relation to values such as family and marriage is not without paradox. He represents them, however, as the devaluated values of the present age without hesitation, but not as entirely impossible (a pastoral picture of the family of his Jewish paramour provokes him to cry).<sup>17</sup> In spite of this, François, as most of his intellectuals peers, experiences discomfort with any idea of marriage or a life spent together. Therefore, for François, marriage to his ex-girlfriend Myriam, who is half his age, is a utopian project, as it might spoil his sexual pleasure in life:

"Those sentences from *En ménage* kept coming back to me, piercing me, and I was painfully aware that I hadn't even suggested that Myriam come and live with me, that we move in together, but I knew that wasn't the real problem. Her parents were prepared to rent her an apartment, and mine was just a one-bedroom – a big one-bedroom, but still. Living together would have spelled the end of all sexual desire between us, and we were still too young to survive that as a couple.

14 "These two baby boomers had always been completely self-centred, and I had no reason to think they'd willingly take me in. Occasionally I found myself wondering whether I'd ever see my parents again before they died, but the answer was always negative, and I didn't think even a civil war could bring us together." *Ibid.*, p. 88.

15 "The third letter, by contrast, held a surprise. Sent from the city hall in Nevers, it expressed its deepest condolences on the death of my mother and informed me that the body had been transported to the city coroner's office, which I should contact in order to make the necessary arrangements. The letter was dated Tuesday, 31 May. I quickly flipped through the pile. There was one follow-up letter postmarked 14 June and another from 28 June. Finally, on 11 July the city informed me that, pursuant to article L 2223–27 of the General Local Authorities Code, the city had deposited my mother's body in the common division of the municipal cemetery. I had five years to order the exhumation of her body and its reburial in a private plot, at the end of which time it would be cremated and the ashes scattered in a 'garden of memory'. If I were to request this exhumation, I would be liable for the expense incurred by the municipality – one coffin, four bearers, the cost of the plot itself. I certainly hadn't imagined my mother leading a vibrant social life, attending conferences on pre-Columbian civilisation or making the rounds of the local Romanesque churches with other women her age. Even so, I had no idea she was so completely alone. They'd probably tried to get in touch with my father, too, and he must have left the letters unanswered. In spite of everything, it bothered me to think of her being buried in a potter's field (this, the Internet informed me, was the former name for the common division of the municipal cemetery), and I wondered what had become of her French bulldog (humane society? euthanasia by injection?)." *Ibid.*, pp. 208–09f.

16 "It was becoming more and more obvious to me that I would never understand women. Here was a normal – almost cartoonishly normal – woman, and yet she'd seen something in my father, something my mother and I never saw. And I don't think it was only, or even mainly, a question of money. She made plenty herself; that much was clear from her clothes, her hair, the way she talked. In that ordinary old man she, and she alone, had found something to love." *Ibid.*, pp. 233f.

17 "I'd visited her parents once, when we were just starting to go out. They lived in a house in the Cité des Fleurs, behind the Brochant metro. There was a garage and a toolshed, it looked like something you might find in a little village in the provinces somewhere, anywhere but in Paris. I remember we had dinner in the garden, the daffodils were in bloom. Her family had been very kind to me, friendly and welcoming, and without treating me as special in any way, which was even better. As her father was uncorking a bottle of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, it suddenly occurred to me that for the last twenty years Myriam had had dinner with her parents every night, that she helped her little brother with his homework, that she took her little sister shopping for clothes. They were a tribe, a close-knit family tribe, and as I thought back on my own life, it was so unlike anything I'd ever known that I almost broke down in sobs." *Ibid.*, p. 135–36.

In the old days, people lived as families, that is to say, they reproduced, slogged through a few more years, long enough to see their children reach adulthood, then went to meet their Maker. The reasonable thing nowadays was for people to wait until they were closer to fifty or sixty and then move in together, when the one thing their ageing, aching bodies craved was a familiar touch, reassuring and chaste, and when the delights of regional cuisine, as celebrated every Sunday on Les Escapades de Petitrenaud, took precedence over all other pleasures. (...).” (Houellebecq, 2015:138-139). A refusal of any life as a couple prior to the age of 50 or 60 is not merely an *idée fixe* of an apathetic university professor. Almost none of the characters in the novel practice familial life prior to the change in the political regime following the second round of elections. A family life is more an excess<sup>18</sup> than a rule. It has been substituted by online portals for singles and escort sites, and it is possible only in Huysmans’ literature of days past.

Thus, the main account strategy of Houellebecq’s narration is a persistent repetition of taboo topics or of something that an average member of the socio-democratic Western societies should allegedly be ashamed of or about which he should remain silent. This is basic Houellebecq’s instinct, to provoke political correctness and shake the ideas that make the West what it is, while insisting on its paradoxes.<sup>19</sup> Still, many others have also purported that “the Western civilization heads toward the Last Man, a pathetic being without great passions or commitment. Incapable of dreaming, tired of life, he does not risk anything, he asks for comfort and safety only, the expression of tolerance of one toward the other (...).” (Žižek, 2015:14).

In that sense, Houellebecq does not provide a radically new picture of the West. Yet, what is then so intolerable and blasphemous in his representation? Why can’t the liberal West, in addition to all the permanent spots of its heritage such as egalitarianism, personal liberties, and freedom of speech, endure an anecdote on its own account? In any case, an interconnection between the media and politics represented in the novel is by no way a remote, ultramodern future of Paris or Europe, it is a living presence. These excogitations do not provide a new picture of the world, and maybe it is more wondrous not to criticize it than to be proud of it, as emphasized by the narrator: “Western nations took a strange pride in this system, though it amounted to little more than a power-sharing deal between two rival gangs, and they would even go to war to impose it on nations that failed to share their enthusiasm.” (Houellebecq, 2015:59). Thus, the novel appalls instead of us, it reiterates, obscenely and

18 E.g., only François’ colleague Marie-Françoise Tanneur practices familial life.

19 For instance, the idea of gender equality and women suffrage becomes an issue of principal character’s doubt and examination. In a discussion with Myriam, François says, “(...) I don’t know, I guess I must be kind of macho. I’ve never really been convinced that it was a good idea for women to get the vote, study the same things as men, go into the same professions, et cetera. I mean, we’re used to it now – but was it really a good idea?” Ibid., pp. 48f. Yet, the statements like this were a cause for the critics to accuse Houellebecq’s civic persona of misogyny or of a treatment of woman as a mere object of sexual desire or a family-maintaining machine, although that relation of the main character toward the women is ambivalent, impossible, and simultaneously desired (cf. *ibid.*, p. 249). Myriam is surely a personification of potential happiness, of which, as a matter of fact, the main antihero voluntarily gives up even prior to Myriam’s departure, with her family, to Israel, i.e., to Tel-Aviv, due to a newly created political situation unfavorable to the Jews in Paris, being disgusted by the idea of a common life.



directly, that the media representations of quotidian politics present a simulacrum we live in, and that they are a symptom of our insecure boundaries between fiction and reality. This is something that causes pathogenic anxiety with regard to Houellebecq's prose, and not the author's statements in the media, which have labeled him as a self-declared Islamophobe or a misogynist. Bearing in mind the fact that the narrator explicitly stresses in the novel, *passim*, that he is disinterested in politics and that he is ignorant about the Islamic religion, there is no reason to hypocritically resent this unreliable narrator for such a typically Western freedom of speech on Islam, family, University or women. Additionally, any election victory implies a rhetoric of a newly instituted regime and colonization by its ideology, a political, educational or religious one. Is the life we live in the West a result of our subjective projection or of a media simulacrum? Eventually, it is unclear whether it is an uncanny European political reality or an allegedly shifted reality, in which exclusively men and Muslims may be university professors subsequent to the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood, and only those professors who will convert to Islam may remain at the university school. In that scenario, Sorbonne receives funds from Saudi Arabia, and the educational system in general assumes slightly different contours (elementary school is compulsory, public universities die out while the private ones proliferate). However, the narrator's *truth* is enigmatic. It is unknown whether it is a step backward or forward for the French society, though a new system brings along less violence and criminality, unemployment (as women are not in the labor market anymore), an economic boom, polygamy, etc.

The narration in the end does not provide for a clear answer whether François made use of the possibility to replace a premature demission with his return to the University if he converts to Islam. According to Catherine Belsey, the aspects of the Real in a culture may signal an ethical message, an ideological control, or a determinism of a culture in certain moment, but the culture itself does not make us better or worse. In other words, if people have difficulty enduring the effects of the Real visible in this novel, they do not exclude a possibility of resistance: if they do not eliminate our dissatisfaction, they provide for an avenue to its core. Furthermore, to a meticulous reader of Houellebecq's *Submission*, they may tell more than they think they know about who and what they are.

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# POKORAVANJE ZAZORNOM.

## ZAŠTO HOUELLEBECQOVA PROZA IZAZIVA NELAGODU U MEDIJSKOM I JAVNOM PROSTORU?

### Sažetak

Od prvog pojavljivanja na europskoj književnoj sceni Michel Houellebecq ne prestaje dijeliti i medije i javnost. Kritika je neprestano isticala kontroverznost njegove proze u kojoj je između ostaloga često prepoznavala reakcionarnost, rasizam, mizoginiju, mizantropiju, vulgarnost, populizam, nihilizam i cinizam. U radu se analizira što u Houellebecqovoj prozi mediji koji oblikuju javno mnijenje, ali su i komunikacijski kanal stavova znanstvene zajednice, prepoznaju kao zazorno. Pritom se polazi od pretpostavke da zazorno izbija u njegovim prozama kao ono s čime se kultura suočava s velikom nelagodom.

**Ključne riječi:** Houellebecq, realno, kultura, politika i etika pripovijedanja