

Popular Culture as ‘The Spacious Mirror’: An Analysis of *The R Document*

by Irving Wallace

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to explore What has made the best sellers inherit the place of the classics partially? With increase in population, there is corresponding expansion in social, economic and cultural aspects of life. Entertainment has become a channel of identifying oneself. Education has become accessible to the common man. Today, heroes no longer portray royal blood but royal ideology, readily accepted by the average man. Thus, popular culture has become part and parcel of literature and research today. *The R Document* is a novel, of the political thriller and legal thriller types, written by Irving Wallace, published in 1976. The book is a fictional account of an ultimately unsuccessful effort by the FBI Director to destroy the Bill of Rights and take over the United States.

'Instant' intrigues us. Mom thaws out instant meals to supplement instant coffee, instant soup, and instant sex. Nobody has time any more to coffee to perk, the soup to simmer, or physical attraction to grow into love. Who has time to waste on preliminaries these days? Besides, you can always switch to another brand... (Fiswick, 1977: 21)

Two three decades ago the study of popular culture in an academic discipline was seen as an unthinkable pursuit. Today more and more research is done in this area. In many universities throughout the world, around half of the students choose to do research in Popular Culture. Authors like Arthur Hailey, Irving Wallace, Mario Puzo, Ira Levin, Robin Cook and Vladimir Nabokov are now included in the academia. What has made the best sellers inherit the place of the classics partially? With increase in population, there is corresponding expansion in social, economic and cultural aspects of life. Entertainment has become a channel of identifying oneself. Education has become accessible to the common man. Today, heroes no longer portray royal blood but royal ideology, readily accepted by the average man. Thus, popular culture has become part and parcel of literature and research today. To quote Gerald Graff in his book *Literature Against Itself*, "Popular culture is the 'power of powerlessness'. By the power of powerlessness, I mean the hold that sophisticated ideologies of alienation exert on the average citizen in his understanding of himself and the world." (Graff, 1977:3) Why something becomes bestseller? The answer to this question is popular Culture. Therefore, there is an urgent need to take a closer look at this puzzling phenomenon, probing into its nature and its effects on the contemporary civilization.

In the book *The History of Popular Culture*, the editors Norman F Cantor and Michael S. Werthman maintain that "The popular culture may be seen as all those things man does and all those artifacts he creates for their own sake, all that diverts his mind and body from the sad business of life. Popular Culture is really what people do when they are not working; it is a man in pursuit of pleasure, excitement, beauty and fulfillment." (Cantor and Werthman, 1969:14)

John G. Cawelti in his article 'The Concept of Formula in the Study of Popular Literature' in the book *Popular Culture Mirror of American Life* (1977), states that a Popular Culture book/story has a structure with narrative conventions articulating a variety of cultural functions as a whole. In addition to this structure, dimensions of ritual, game and dream are amalgamated into plot, character and setting.

The story, plot, character and setting have been changed from time to time. The present day Popular Culture in some respects is an escape from mundane life. It is always in the hunt for something new, away from the harshness of the daily life. The urge to break the monotony of life and the desire for the adventure for a new enterprise are the ideas essentially constituted by Popular Culture. Therefore

newer films, new novels, new games and sports are created constantly. The urge to get something on the other side of the fence is always there in man. Popular Culture thus comes into existence when the circumstances or the environment around an individual help him nurture a particular idea so that he can develop it individually and later collectively. Popular Culture is that which conveys meaning to many in order to enlarge the experience of human race in general. That is reason why, in a canon, old texts are subjected to give place to the newer and modified texts. These texts provide us with a meaning comprehensive to the society at that given period.

Irving Wallace:

Irving Wallace (March 19, 1916 - June 29, 1990) was an American bestselling author and screenwriter. His extensively researched books included such page-turners as *The Chapman Report* (1960), about human sexuality; *The Prize* (1962), a fictional behind-the-scenes account of the Nobel Prizes; *The Man*, about a black man becoming president of the U.S. in the 1960s; and *The Word* (1972), about the discovery of a new gospel.

Wallace began selling stories to magazines when he was a teenager. In World War II Wallace served in the Capra unit in Fort Fox along with Theodor Seuss Geisel - more popularly known as Dr. Seuss - and continued to write for magazines. Wallace was a prolific author and published 33 books during his lifetime, all translated into 31 different languages. Irving Wallace was married to Sylvia Wallace, a former magazine writer and editor. Several of Wallace's books have been made into films. Among his best known books are *The Chapman Report* (1960), *The Prize* (1962), *The Word* (1972) and *The Fan Club* (1974). He also produced some notable non-fiction works, including several editions of *The People's Almanac* and *The Book of Lists*.

The following quotes reveal the mind and temperament of Irving Wallace. It is clearly expressed in his selected novel also.

- "To be one's self, and unafraid whether right or wrong, is more admirable than the easy cowardice of surrender to conformity."
- "If successful novelists had a formula, they would not have failures, and I know of no novelist who has not had a failure at one time or another."
- "Every man can transform the world from one of monotony and drabness to one of excitement and adventure."
- "We have placed security in a position of primacy and subordinated individual liberty to it."

The R. Document:

The R Document is a novel, of the political thriller and legal thriller types, written by Irving Wallace, published in 1976. The book is a fictional account of an ultimately unsuccessful effort by the FBI Director to destroy the Bill of Rights and take over the United States.

The R Document occurs during a future time in the United States when crime has become so extreme a problem. The FBI Director Vernon T. Tynan is promoting an especially drastic solution: a Thirty-Fifth Article of Amendment to the Constitution of the United States that would allow the Bill of Rights to be suspended in favor of its provisions during a national domestic crisis. Tynan, who had joined the Bureau during J. Edgar Hoover's tenure as its Director, had resigned after Hoover had died rather than work under any of Hoover's successors.

The protagonist of the novel is Attorney General Christopher Collins, whom Wallace modeled on Ramsey Clark, who, while in that office, became one of Hoover's bitterest enemies. At the time when the novel begins, his predecessor, former United States Army Colonel Noah Baxter, is ill, and indeed dying, from a stroke he had suffered. Tynan, the novel's primary antagonist, is responsible for having proposed the 35th Amendment and sold it to Andrew Wadsworth, President of the United States, and the Congress. Moreover, he has secretly formed a two-stage plan to supplement and implement the 35th upon its ratification--that plan going under the code name of "The R Document." ("The Reconstruction Document") Baxter, who had suffered his stroke during a meeting with Tynan and Associate Deputy FBI Director Harry Adcock several months before the events in the novel, tries to reveal to Collins the truth about The R Document and its two "pages," but Baxter dies before he can pass on to Collins what he knows. A Catholic, Baxter had made a deathbed confession to a priest in which he had mentioned The R Document, and Tynan has Adcock attempt to learn that confession's contents from the priest by extortion. This extortion, which fails, owes to an attempt that hard-core delinquents had made, years ago, to stop an anti-drug crusade which the priest had been conducting by entrapping him for drug dealing. The priest ultimately passes on to Collins what little Baxter could tell him of his deathbed message.

1. Tynan's underhandedness:

Tynan proves to be attempting to bring about ratification of the 35th by means of similar scandal-based extortions of the California legislators who will vote on its ratification. Indeed, he has been expanding the Official and Confidential, Files that Hoover maintained, for bullying and scandal-based extortion. Collins, who himself is from California, is advised to argue for the amendment on a program called *Search for Truth*. But once he is in California, an attempt, ultimately unsuccessful, is made to compromise him by having a prostitute planted in his hotel room.

2. Search for Truth:

On the set of the program, which a certain Brant Vanbrugh moderates, Collins is embroiled in a debate with Tony Pierce, who had resigned from the FBI after throwing his support to FBI Special Agents that Tynan was manhandling and now heads a grassroots organization called DBR, or Defenders of the Bill of Rights, which he has organized to stop the 35th. Before their debate begins, Collins realizes that he is defending a bomb that will blow the Bill of Rights out of the Constitution because of his own ambition to show his father what he has achieved—misplaced ambition because his father has been dead for years by this time. After the debate ends, the nauseated Collins barely finds a men's restroom and vomits into its toilet, having realized that he has been on the wrong side of the debate over the 35th the whole time.

3. Tynan against Collins and Collins's encounter with Radenbaugh:

Collins's son Josh has joined DBR, and he points out to his father that no government of any truly free nation has a qualified bill of rights which is unguaranteed and/or can be suspended or revoked in peacetime; only tyrannies and freedom less nations do. Tynan, in the meantime, is trying to destroy Collins, whom he and Adcock had realized—through bugging, eavesdropping, and wiretapping—might not be fully behind the 35th before Collins himself did. To do that without involving President Wadsworth, Tynan seeks out money from Donald Radenbaugh, an attorney whom Baxter considered one of his few friends and confidants, who has been confined in Lewisburg Prison since being wrongly convicted of extortion. After springing Radenbaugh and giving him the false identity of Herbert Miller, Tynan uses the money to stage Miller's murder. Horrified at what Tynan has done, Radenbaugh seeks out his daughter, whom he encounters as Collins is visiting her.

4. Radenbaugh's story:

Radenbaugh then tells Collins about Page 1 of The R Document, explaining that Tynan had conceived the 35th Amendment by examining communities with low crime rates in hopes of recommending anti-crime legislation to Wadsworth and the Congress, and finding "company towns" to have the lowest crime rates, and Argo City, Arizona, owned by Argo Smelting And Mining, where the Bill of Rights had been effectively suspended, to have the best long-time record. Tynan's pilot program for the 35th, his test of it in action, consisted of his running a prototype safety committee in Argo City; the results of Tynan's experiment there, Radenbaugh explains, make up Page 1 of The R Document.

5. Argo City:

Collins and Radenbaugh travel to Argo City along with John G. Maynard, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, who had sworn both Collins and Wadsworth into their respective offices. What they discover their leaves Maynard so horror-stricken that he plans to denounce the 35th. But Tynan has him killed before he can get the chance.

6. Smear campaign:

To preserve his own job as FBI Director when Collins tries to get him dismissed after Maynard's murder, Tynan targets Collins's wife Karen, a mother to be about whose status as such few others know as the novel begins. Tynan first accuses Karen of a murder for which she had been prosecuted before she and Collins had first met. At her trial, whose prosecutor had been trying to make a name for himself, the deadlocked jury that had forced a mistrial had favored her acquittal eleven to one from the first minute of deliberations; the one holdout, who had once worked for Karen's father but been fired from his job, had been finding her father, not Karen herself, guilty, and had held out for four days before the others gave up on the case. When that apparently fails, Tynan alleges that Karen, who is actually shy when it comes to marital affections, has been a central participant in wild orgies.

7. FBI and IFBI:

Collins, for his part, has encountered Pierce and the former FBI Special Agents Tynan had manhandled by threatening them with assignments of exile to Butte, Montana or Cincinnati, Ohio, which are described as Tynan's political prisons for Bureau personnel whom he wishes to punish, belittle, or humiliate. These former Special Agents have formed a group they call, unofficially, the IFBI, which stands for the Investigators of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. During this, Collins discovers that Baxter's grandson Rick had accidentally caught the Tynan-Baxter conference in Baxter's house on tape the previous January, when Baxter had suffered his stroke. It contains Page 2 of The R Document, and as Adcock has been eavesdropping and has learned of it as well, he intercepts the original tape before destroying it before Collins's and Pierce's eyes. It is Karen who realizes that Ishmael Young may have a copy of Rick Baxter's tape, and she so informs her husband.

8. Exposure:

Young, seeking justice for having been forced to ghost-write Tynan's autobiography, does indeed prove to have the copy of Rick Baxter's tape, which is copied and authenticated. Collins then manages--barely in time--to reveal its contents to California legislators. As it proves, under Page 2 of The R Document, Tynan would actually personally create the national crisis that the 35th, once ratified, would need to be invoked by ordering the President of the United States assassinated, thereby giving the Attorney General grounds to suspend the Bill of Rights. Learning about this plot from Tynan had apparently been what had triggered Baxter's ultimately deadly stroke, and learning the contents of page 2 of The R Document ends up striking the shocked legislators as a "Reichstag fire" that would make Tynan effectively the "Fuehrer of America." The 35th is unanimously defeated, and the Bill of Rights is saved. Tynan shoots himself in the mouth, and Adcock disappears. The novel ends with grounds for hope, as the President agrees to pardon the wrongly-convicted Radenbaugh, then forms a commission to clean Tynan's

evil influence out of the FBI and overhaul it; after that, he promises to discuss, with Collins, a comprehensive program of economic and social legislation which will be intended to solve the problem of crime, the original problem that had actually led Tynan to hatch his plot in the first place.

Nandkishore Varma in his review about *The R. Document* mentions:

“There was a time when I was a fan of Irving Wallace, and the type of thrillers he produced. I read this during that time, in the early eighties, and was enthralled. It is the story of a proposed amendment to the US constitution, to suspend the Bill of Rights during times of "national emergency". This was originally published the year after Indira Gandhi declared a national emergency in India, so I think Wallace got the idea from there.

It is taut, fast-paced and the denouement is appropriately satisfying. But please don't show this book to the Trump administration - it might give them practical ideas. And in reality, there may not be any happy endings.” (Nandkishore Varma: Jan 31, 2017)

It is said that only literary texts that stand the test of time can be included in the canon. Is this the reason that why Popular Culture texts are included and excluded so frequently? Canonization is the act of inclusion and exclusion of literary texts in the academia. It is believed that a Popular Culture text should prove its worth to enter into the Canon. A popular Culture text includes ever changing ideologies in it. Therefore a book with recent ideologies would be replaced by the book with the traditional ones. *The R Document*, popular Culture book in the canon manifests the acceptability of the subject.

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