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CHUCK PALAHNIUK AND JEAN BAUDRILLARD:  
THE TERMINAL STATE OF HUMAN SUBJECTIVITY

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A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
English Composition:  
English Literature

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By  
Elisabet 'Osk Takehana

June 2006

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by  
Elisabet 'Osk Takehana


June 2006

Approved by:

  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis offers a reading of Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Invisible Monsters* using theories by Jean Baudrillard as a lens through which to better understand Palahniuk's commentary on the effects mass media have on human subjectivity in the terminal state.

I speculate as to how media elements appear in the novel in order to evaluate how mass media create a terminal state in *Invisible Monsters*. Media influences conflict and distort the idea of the humanistic individual, so highly regarded in American thought by upholding the terminal state. My term, terminal state, is derived from Jean Baudrillard's and Scott Bukatman's work. Baudrillard sees the human subject as a network terminal that functions in communication systems just as its nonhuman elements and where meaningful exchange between human and machine is impossible. Bukatman's terminal identity is an existence in which the human subject feels a sense of agency by working with their machinic others while simultaneously redefining what it means to be human. Palahniuk's characters are not as fatalistic as Baudrillard or as optimistic as Bukatman. This space between the network terminal and terminal identity is the terminal state of

which the characters of *Invisible Monsters* are a glowing example of since they neither resign themselves to the passive role of terminal or the confident human subject that successfully interfaces with machines. The terminal state exists within a terminal network, a geographic space composed of terminals in two dimensional space, while still clinging to or trying to achieve humanistic ideals of individuality, identity, and morality.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT . . . . . iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS . . . . . v

CHAPTER ONE: THE SIMULACRUM: SERIAL REPRODUCTION,  
 APPEARANCE, AND ELECTRONIC MASS MEDIA:  
 BIRTH OF THE TERMINAL STATE

    Introduction . . . . . 1

    The Simulacrum: Serial Reproduction, Appearance,  
 and Electronic Mass Media: Birth of the Terminal  
 State . . . . . 17

    Appearance Value in the Simulacrum . . . . . 19

    Human Subjects as Products of the Terminal  
 Network . . . . . 31

    The Terminal Network as Without Escape . . . . . 42

    The Loss of Affect and Morality in the  
 Terminal State . . . . . 54

CHAPTER TWO: THE TERMINAL STATE: PLAY AND THE LOSS OF  
 HISTORY AND HEIRACHY IN A CIRCULAR  
 NETWORK . . . . . 69

    Eradicating the Privileged Role of Parent and  
 God . . . . . 72

    The Ahistorical / Indefinable Nature of the  
 Terminal State . . . . . 80

    Neo-Agency in the Act of Play: Manipulating the  
 Terminal Network . . . . . 91

    The Human Subject and the Monitor as a Reality  
 Loop . . . . . 107

CHAPTER THREE: ROLES, LABELS, AND THE END OF AN  
 A PRIORI IDENTITY IN THE QUEST  
 TOWARDS THE MODEL . . . . . 126

The Impossibility of an Individual Identity with the Existence of Predetermined Subject Roles . . . . .	128
The Subject's Drive to Exert a Pure Existence . . . . .	140
Surpassing Differentiation, Binaries, and Boundaries . . . . .	152
Consumerism and Attempting to Attain the Model Existence . . . . .	159
Escaping an Escape Velocity: Renegotiating Human Subjectivity within the Terminal State . . . . .	175
WORKS CITED. . . . .	185



## CHAPTER ONE

### THE SIMULACRUM, SERIAL REPRODUCTION, APPEARANCE, AND ELECTRONIC MASS MEDIA: BIRTH OF THE TERMINAL STATE

This is the world we live in.

Just go with the prompts.

--Palahniuk, *Invisible  
Monsters* 21

#### Introduction

In this project I propose to examine Chuck Palahniuk's novel, *Invisible Monsters*, as a postmodern fictional commentary on contemporary American culture that is especially susceptible to an analysis that utilizes many of Jean Baudrillard's theories. While my project looks at *Invisible Monsters* and a specific human existence that I call the terminal state others before me have used the term "terminal" to explain a new existence and sense perception with the rise and spread of mass media. Some, like Paul Virilio, stress the confining circularity of the human as terminal with such ideas as terminal art, an art that does not require exhibition or a human audience, even to the

extreme of having only the camera and the artist validating each other's existence. Palahniuk's characters act out the same phenomenon when they stare at their own filmed image on a television monitor, essentially staring at themselves staring at themselves. The term terminal has also been used to describe human existence as terminals on a grid-like plain, which harkens back to Baudrillard's term "network terminal", an existence in which the human is merely a terminal within massive communication systems. Scott Bukatman works to take Baudrillard's depiction of this human as terminal to an existence where the subject does have a sense of agency with its terminal identity. In the introduction of his book, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*, Bukatman claims the science fiction's centrality saying,

It has fallen to science fiction to repeatedly narrate a new subject that can somehow directly interface with - and master - the cybernetic technologies of the Information Age, an era in which, as Jean Baudrillard observed, the subject has become a "terminal of multiple networks." This new subjectivity is at the center of *Terminal Identity*. (Bukatman 2)

Bukatman views terminal identity as a new subjectivity where humans and technology are "coextensive, codependent, and mutually defining" (22). Bukatman celebrates this empowered subjectivity and cites such theorists as Gilles Deleuze and Donna Haraway to depict a new stage in human existence that celebrates the cyborg of which Baudrillard has a much more negative view. In comparison, the experiences of the characters of *Invisible Monsters* are much less celebratory and more tentative. The characters are still experimenting and feeling out their changing existence as terminals. Instead of embracing what Bukatman calls terminal identity, the characters of *Invisible Monsters* are living in the terminal state, that is, still negotiating between a sense of autonomous individuality and terminal identity, an existence that upholds and aims for a cyborg existence. The characters of *Invisible Monsters* are still very much attached to their physical bodies and have not reached the realm of the cyborg. What I am calling the terminal state is the transitory stage between humanism and Bukatman's terminal identity, hence the extensive use of Jean Baudrillard whose own theory seems to dwell in the terminal state that simultaneously laments the loss of the individual and celebrates the sense of play of the terminal

existence. The terminal state is the societal and psychological state of the human subject who is and feels him or herself as a mere terminal of larger communication systems and social infrastructures that is worked upon by these systems or networks rather than being or feeling him or herself as a unique and autonomous individual who is capable of meaningful exchange.

In reading *Invisible Monsters*, Baudrillard is a valuable theorist to call upon as he is intrigued by the power of mass media to produce a world of simulation, a hyperreality created by humans. In the age of the hyperreal, all that is left is the simulacra, the human made outer shell of what is called reality. Hyperreality, simulation and simulacra are closely knit ideas. For Baudrillard, hyperreality is comprised of "models of a real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra & Simulation*, 1). The hyperreal is a state in which the simulation exists prior to what it represents; in addition, the representation is not inferior to its model. The hyperreal is not an imperfect copy of the real, nor does it replace the real. Instead, the hyperreal is all that exists. Similarly, simulation is not as simple as pretending. To simulate, a subject pushes to create

sensations and phenomena that are indistinguishable from the genuine sensation or phenomenon. Baudrillard illustrates the idea of simulation, pointing out that a person who pretends to be sick lies in bed, but a person who simulates an illness creates the symptoms themselves (*Simulacra & Simulation* 3). The simulacrum is a hyperreal state comprised of the multitude of simulations that have arisen and become commonplace in the post-industrial era. The simulacrum cannot be exchanged for something real because the real no longer exists, as it is indistinguishable from the simulated. Baudrillard claims that a simulacrum is "never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (*Simulacra & Simulation* 6). By these standards, the simulacrum is closed and simultaneously all encompassing as there is nothing outside of it, especially not reality.

Baudrillard, who comes out of the Situationist tradition, takes the ideas of his predecessors and colleagues one step further into the simulacra. Situationists, who rely on Marxist thought, such as Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem, posed the term 'spectacle' as a way to describe social life as merely appearance, as the

"negation of life [which] has invented a visual form for itself" (Debord 14). The spectators or consumers assume a passivity that depends on their "ability to assimilate roles and play them according to official norms" (Vaneigem 128). The Situationists believed that there was a reality behind the spectacle, that, to be revealed, required a proletariat revolt against the mesmerizing power of mass media and consumer society (Plant 10). Jean Baudrillard, and Postmodernism itself, ascribes to many of the Situationists' descriptions of the human experience, but Baudrillard accepts the spectacle as the only experience available to humanity while the Situationists still hold to the idea that a revolution could shake the capitalistic system that gave birth to the spectacle and to bourgeois conformism. Scott Bukatman clearly articulates the differences between the Situationist view and that of Baudrillard, saying: "The passage from Debord's 'spectacle' to Baudrillard's 'simulation' is precisely a shift from a state which constructs the spectacle, to a spectacle which now constructs the state" (Bukatman 68-9). While the spectacle implied an outside, the simulation is all-encompassing. As Sadie Plant, a scholar of the Situationist movement, points out: "Talk of revolution

becomes embarrassing, and the suggestion that history has ended is embraced with open relief. Situationist desires for a 'rise in the pleasure of living' have become the dreams of another age and no longer have anything to say to us" (185). Unfortunately, for the Situationists, the glamour of revolt has been replaced by the intrigue of Baudrillardesque nihilism.

*Invisible Monsters* is the exploration of humankind's multiplicities within the simulacrum where hyperreality and human subjectivity is juxtaposed with the idea of an unattainable sense of reality and the illusion of humanistic individualism. No critical work has been done on this text and Palahniuk remains largely unknown in the academic world of literature. The novel is a montage of flashbacks and pent up thought shaken like a soda can until it explodes. While Palahniuk writes *Invisible Monsters* in nonchronological order, chronology and the relationships between the four characters of Shannon McFarland, Brandy Alexander, Manus Kelley, and Evie Cotrell become clearer at the end of the novel. A complete synopsis is impossible but the fundamentals of the characters' relationships will serve as an introduction for the purposes of this study. McFarland, a low end model who shoots her own jaw off,

travels across the United States with her brother, Alexander, and her ex-boyfriend, Kelley. Alexander, who also disfigured himself by exploding a hairspray can in his face, is in the midst of changing his sex and becoming his sister. Alexander is rejected by his family as a homosexual upon contracting gonorrhoea from being molested by Kelley. Kelley, a police detective struggling with accepting his own homosexuality, had been investigating Alexander's accident with the hairspray. The three set out on an aimless road trip, which started as McFarland's escape from Cotrell's lonely home after burning it down and taking Kelley as a hostage. The three traveling companions are trying to find solace in their fragmented lives; instead, McFarland's own desire of revenge against her best friend who slept with her boyfriend wins out when they find Cotrell and burn another house of hers down during her wedding. Cotrell, once a man, was McFarland's best friend from modeling school who had an affair with Kelley while McFarland was recovering from shooting her jaw off. Cotrell, supposedly mistaking Alexander for McFarland, shoots Alexander though not fatally. The scattered nature of the novel's structure is mimicked in the characters' own convoluted and entangled relationships.



Taking a closer look at the differences between postmodern subjectivity and humanistic individuality provides an explanation for the changing experiences of humanity with the larger acceptance of anti-foundationalist thought. Madan Sarup clearly defines the differences between the individual and the subject in the introduction of his book, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*. The term 'individual,' as Sarup defines it, "presumes that man is a free, intellectual agent and that thinking processes are not coerced by historical or cultural circumstances" (1). The 'individual' is supposedly in existence before history, culture, or language. The term 'subject,' however, holds a completely different interpretation of the human experience. Sarup states: "The term 'subject' helps us to conceive of human reality as a construction, as a product of signifying activities which are both culturally specific and generally unconscious. The category of the subject calls into question that notion of the self-synonymous with consciousness; it 'decentres' consciousness" (2). In this case, the 'subject' is produced by the history, culture, and language as opposed to an 'individual' that supposedly exists before or outside of history, culture, and language.

Neither Baudrillard nor Palahniuk depict humans as individuals, but work to renegotiate how humanity copes with the role of the 'subject' when humans still yearn for and at times believe in the possibility of their own autonomy. Scott Bukatman quotes the historian Walter McDougall who also notices this fence sitting regarding human existence when examining the popularity of *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* in America. McDougall states: "Americans delight in such futuristic epics as *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* precisely because the human qualities of a Captain Kirk or Han Solo are always victorious over the very technological mega-systems that make their adventures possible. We want to believe that we can subsume our individualism into the rationality of systems yet retain our humanity still" (Bukatman 8). In the face of even the most massive and overpowering situations and environments created by technological and mass media advancements, the human subject in the terminal state still wants to see the role of human individual as the leading role and the hero.

Palahniuk critiques the universality of American popular culture and how the idea of the American humanistic individual is disconnected from the reality of homogeneity that exists in the simulacrum. This disconnect between

popular culture and the individual is caused by a similar rift between the spectacularized images perpetuated by mass media and the everyday occurrences of life in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century America.

Baudrillard speculates on the possibility of interaction between the masses and interactive media. In an interview with Roger Célestin, Baudrillard states, "[I]nteraction only gives the illusion that there is an actual exchange, when in fact everyone is merely a kind of network terminal, and it's the network itself that's functioning" (Célestin 12). The idea of a humanistic individual free of the effects of culture, society, and language, and of metanarratives that explain human existence, have been compromised by the spread of anti-foundationalist thought. Mass media and popular culture are elements that attest to humankind's existence as subjects, as products of cultural discourse. In this interpretation of the human experience, the network manipulates the human subject rather than the autonomous individual that manipulates the network. For Baudrillard and Palahniuk, this scenario is equally a trap and a liberation that allows subjects the ultimate freedom of creating and continually recreating their realities

while agonizing over the limitations of the network they function in.

The battlefield of postmodern human subjectivity that is the terminal state, this desire to be a unique and autonomous individual while functioning within a terminal network, is displayed in the characters of *Invisible Monsters* where the idea of the real and of the hyperreal created by mass media have their final stand - hyperreality cannot be masked by reality as differentiation between the supposed real and the simulated is impossible. In his interview with Roger Célestin, Baudrillard argues that communication between humans and machines never have a meaningful exchange and in this system of communication, everything is a network terminal, including humans. For Baudrillard, terminals are all things in the circular system of communication between humans and machines. I would like to expand Baudrillard's idea of the human as network terminal beyond communication systems that include machines, to an overall commentary of postmodern American society in the height of market capitalism and its subsequent rampant consumerism. In this type of existence, which I call the terminal state, the human subject no longer values an a priori identity and understands

subjectivity as a product but is aware of one's ability to reproduce oneself in several roles and identities. The terminal network, this geographic space, has a grid-like quality much like looking at a subway map, where each station on a map appears as a terminal. This changing geographic and temporal space is a part of what complicates the terminal state in which humans attempt to mesh together human space and perception with those of technologies and media. The terminal network appears to eliminate hierarchies that privilege one type of existence over another as it is composed of terminals that function on a common plane. Existence is flat and two-dimensional, and is concerned with the surface alone, glossing over or concealing the political and economic forces that perpetuate the network. A sense of history or destiny is absent from the terminal network as it is the system which works upon terminals; for example, it is one's culture or society that works upon the subject, not the reverse. I posit that the American society that *Invisible Monsters* depicts is a terminal network and Palahniuk's characters, inseparable from their encoding via the mass media, are created as hyperreal selves longing to become humanistic individuals. This new interpretation of human existence

arises with the widespread acceptance of anti-foundationalist thought. Where humans have always been influenced and affected by their society, culture, and language, the belief in metanarratives that provide ultimate explanations of life and humankind's place in the world has diminished as movements such as Postmodernism and Poststructuralism have shown these metanarratives as ineffective in explaining social phenomena. Regardless of foundationalism's large following in past centuries, humankind has always been a subject of cultural discourse.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter one addresses the issue of media influences and universality on Palahniuk's characters within a terminal network. In an interview with Roger Célestin, Baudrillard describes humans within a communication system that includes humans and machines as "network terminals". By extension, I am calling this system of communication that reduces humans to terminals as a terminal network.

Palahniuk's citing of fashion magazines and photography as well as the structure of his novel demonstrates the power visual communication has in dissolving chronology, genuine human feeling or affect, and individualism, while supporting homogeneity. Popular culture, empowered by mass

media, creates simulations which function just as reality does since there is no conceivable difference between the original and the copy.

The second chapter addresses how influences of mass media testify to the manner in which American society, as depicted in *Invisible Monsters*, creates meaning. I consider the ways media are key to understanding how McFarland, Alexander, Cotrell, and Kelley form opinions of themselves. The mass media mean to separate themselves from the everyday so as to seem untouchable or inconceivable to the ordinary human being. The monotonous experiences of daily life are in sharp contrast to the spectacularized nature of mass media. What the media create is not a tangible reality, but a hyperreality. In addition, the media, especially television in *Invisible Monsters*, only offer an illusion of love and acceptance that the characters yearn for but can never find.

In the final chapter of the thesis, I discuss how Palahniuk challenges the idea of humanistic individualism. I show how the characters of *Invisible Monsters* do not exist as complete and whole individuals, but as multi-dimensional subjects of cultural discourse who act out predetermined roles defined within the terminal state. For

instance, Alexander exists as a male and a female just as McFarland exists as beautiful and disfigured. In addition, these two characters have some parallel experiences, such as self-inflicted facial deformities, that blur the distinction between their separate existences. The four major characters are on a quest towards completion, and function as distorted mirror images of one another. The illusion of individuality becomes merely a ploy used by the mass media and by popular culture to ease the process of integration in and submission to, the spectacle. For Baudrillard, the model exists as an idea, an ideal the series aspires to. Humans exist as this series appeared through seeming personalization, where a human subject feels a sense of individuality by deciding, for example, on the color of a mass produced automobile. The characters' drive to attain the model existence and be important draws upon the idea of American humanistic individualism. Palahniuk demonstrates that humanistic individualism is the model that his characters' serial lives emulate but cannot achieve. Their lives are a product of mass media creating human subjects who are conditioned to believe in their own individualism despite their existence as terminals within a spectacular network that has no escape.



This is the world we live in.

Just go with the prompts.

--Palahniuk, *Invisible  
Monsters* 21

The Simulacrum, Serial Reproduction, Appearance,  
and Electronic Mass Media: Birth  
of the Terminal State

The question of the spectacle of American society becomes a probing exploration of the cultures and mechanisms that produce the human subject and the subject's perception of self, identity, and reality. Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Invisible Monsters* is a manifestation of the inherent struggle between the idea of the humanistic individual whose qualities are idealized and the reality of being merely a subject influenced by mass media, a terminal in an enormous system. This chapter looks first at the state of simulation and its emphasis on appearances that is evident in *Invisible Monsters* and moves on to view the major characters of the novel as homogenized terminals or reproductions that are constantly recycled by the terminal network that produces them. Thirdly, it becomes evident that, while Palahniuk's characters try to escape the terminal network, the complex and all-encompassing

spectacle, there is no existence outside of the network as every role or identity is pre-determined and within the network. Lastly, we will see how this state of humans as terminals has led to the loss of affect, of human relationships and connections, and a semblance of morality in *Invisible Monsters*. The human subject as represented by Palahniuk, unlike the humanistic individual, has no singular identity and becomes a mere effect within the spectacle that has become the hyperreal. Terminal existence moves beyond the Cartesian idea of a human who thinks and knows itself by exposing the multiplicity of human experiences and identities. Bukatman makes this same argument. "If the unitary truth of the Cartesian *cogito* is sufficient in grounding the experience of the human as [Maurice] Merleau-Ponty maintains, then this insufficiency is even more pronounced under the terms of a postmodern reality. In the age of terminal identity, there are a myriad of selves and a multitude of realities" (Bukatman 250). A self-knowing privileged identity does not exist and both terminal identity and the terminal state only emphasize that point. The struggle between viewing oneself as an autonomous individual with a single fated destiny and the product of twenty-first century subjectivity results in

an implosion of meaning where opposites become interchangeable and perception is materialized into a collage, like a cubist painting with multiple perspectives shown simultaneously.

The rubrum lilies in the  
enameled vases are real, not  
silk.

--Palahniuk, *Invisible  
Monsters* 23

#### Appearance Value in the Simulacrum

Without stable content, appearances become the main thrust of manifesting some type of coherence between the continual images or bits of information that mass media perpetuate, a prevalent theme in *Invisible Monsters*. This dependence on appearances is a trait of the spectacle, which Baudrillard takes one step further, creating the simulacrum, a state in which reality has turned to hyperreality. While reality depends on the assumption that there is a knowable and tangible sense of truth or authenticity, hyperreality poses that there is no such thing as the real and functions as a copy without an original. For Baudrillard, the hyperreal, a reality

fabricated by humans, is taken as real and differentiation between the real and the fabricated becomes impossible. Palahniuk states in *Invisible Monsters*: "This [novel] will be ten thousand fashion separates that mix and match to create maybe five tasteful outfits. A million trendy accessories, scarves and belts, shoes and hats and gloves and no real clothes to wear them with" (*Invisible Monsters* 21). There is an emptiness of content and meaning in the fashion image, the very epitome of surface importance that Palahniuk explores through his characters and Baudrillard places as a key trait of the simulacrum. Bukatman also points to the image's prevalent and key role in terminal identity, going so far as to say, "The pervasive domination by and *addiction to*, the image might be regarded as a primary symptom to terminal identity" (Bukatman 26). As Stuart Ewen<sup>1</sup>, a critic who looks specifically at the politics of style in advertisements, points out, for twenty-first century America, appearance replaces content and style takes the role of morals (Ewen 52-3). For Ewen,

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<sup>1</sup> Ewen's essay, "...Images Without Bottom..." looks at style as a cultural phenomenon that subjects turn to in constructing an identity and argues that style is a site of power especially in marketing products and advertising. Style here is seen as rootless and meaningless as it can be lifted from one context to another without consequences.

surface appearances become the lexicon of the mass-mediated society where a person is defined by their clothes, their home, or their car (Ewen 51). Ewen argues that mass mediated America has lost its roots, its stability or history (54) just as Palahniuk's characters have no roots or permanency either in their names, gender, or identity. Perhaps this is why McFarland is initially a model and her brother, Alexander, continues as a model in her place. Even McFarland and Alexander's revolutionary acts that were supposed to free them from the seemingly rational life of contemporary America, a coherent life lived in the spectacle, are merely surface changes and manipulations of appearances. McFarland shoots her own jaw off and Alexander, a man, decides to mutilate his own body by going through the process of changing his sex. Their mutilations are normal in their hyperreal and spectacularized world. Bukatman looks at this same phenomenon in the cut-up or collage style of art that mixes low-end materials with the high art of painting. Bukatman argues: "There are ways to challenge or even resist the controlling powers of the spectacle from within the spectacular culture itself. The means of resistance have themselves become spectacular in form" (Bukatman 39). McFarland's and Alexander's methods

to resist their spectacular lives are in themselves spectacular in their extremity both visually and physically.

Palahniuk admits the created, simulated production of *Invisible Monsters* by openly aligning his novel with fashion magazines, citing *Vogue* and *Glamour* as examples of how mass-mediated society functions. In the place of logical progression, of chronology, and of rational expectation, is the mere mass of information loosely organized and broken into pieces and scattered throughout the novel. Palahniuk advises his readers: "Don't look for a contents page, buried magazine-style twenty pages back from the front. Don't expect to find anything right off. There isn't a real pattern to anything, either. Stories will start and then, three paragraphs later: Jump to page whatever. Then, jump back" (*Invisible Monsters* 20). The expectation of order that has survived the print society is beginning to dissolve in the electronic information age. Instead of a clear chronological progression, Palahniuk chooses to write each chapter out of order in respect to time and space, creating the equivalent of brief images, or sound bites, that must be collected and consumed by the reader. He originally formatted *Invisible Monsters* to be

printed in chronological order with instructions at the end of each chapter telling the reader what chapter to read next, such as "jump to chapter 23" after reading chapter 28 (Palahniuk, Letter to the author). This phenomenon divorces expectations of older media, such as the printed book, from media such as photography or television which Marshall McLuhan<sup>2</sup>, a theorist of electronic mass media, argues as changing the perception of human beings by reframing certain situations, and distorting time and space in the continual procession of images. Instead of the individual being autonomous, the human subject becomes fluid and codependent. "This is the world we live in. Conditions change and we mutate" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 19). The identities and lives of the four main characters of the novel, Shannon McFarland, Brandy Alexander, Manus Kelley, and Evie Cotrell, become as Neal

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<sup>2</sup> Marshall McLuhan's ground breaking book, *The Medium is the Massage*, explores the positive effects of mass media as creating a global village that brings societies closer to one another and implies an ease in meshing together the human and electronic communication which many theorists and critics have undermined, pointing to McLuhan's neglect of the political and economic issues that necessarily arise in the process of globalization.

Gabler<sup>3</sup> observes in *Life: The Movie*, "a series of scenes, each one requiring some kind of adaptation in character" (Gabler 230). One's identity and idea of the self is malleable and flexible as it is formed by elements of one's culture, society, and relationships. For instance, while the four main characters of *Invisible Monsters* are each separate people, it becomes more and more evident that the dividing line between where one stops and the other begins is hard to discern.

Palahniuk's characters live in a hyperreal world, a simulation made by humankind, not by God or fate, as even God himself, in Baudrillard's view, can be simulated. Cotrell and Alexander are both men who decide to make themselves women. McFarland is beautiful, but she decides to disfigure herself. When Palahniuk describes Alexander's face, the imagery depends on unnatural elements such as consumer products, or the colors of Alexander's make-up.

The face surrounded in black veil that leans over me is a surprise of color. The skin is a lot of pink around a Plumbago mouth, and the eyes are

---

<sup>3</sup> Neal Gabler's book, *Life: The Movie*, aims to examine the birth and effects of America's obsession with "Real Life" or reality television and its vicarious and unlimited appetite for gossip in the mass media.



too aubergine. Even these colors are too garish right now, too saturated, too intense. Lurid. You think of cartoon characters. Fashion dolls have pink skin like this, like plastic bandages. Flesh tone. Too aubergine eyes, cheekbones too defined by Rusty Rose blusher. Nothing is left to your imagination. (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 115)

Alexander is not compared to anything real or natural; rather, she is saturated, exaggerated, and cartoonesque. Her face is not only unnaturally pink and covered over with make-up, her entire face has been reconstructed to look like a woman's face. Alexander exaggerates markers of femininity with an unnaturally curvy figure and too much make-up in order to try to solidify what is feminine and play out that part to the nth degree. Baudrillard would see this as a clear example of a simulated woman who is perceived as a genuine woman. For Baudrillard, the fact that Alexander passes as a woman reflects the loss of sovereignty of the biological woman since differentiation between an original and a copy is impossible. In his book *Simulations*, Baudrillard states: "[The real] becomes an allegory of death, but it is reinforced by its very

destruction; it becomes the real for the real, fetish of the lost object - no longer object of representation, but ecstasy of denegation and of its own ritual extermination; the hyperreal" (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 141-2). In this sense, the real moves from being the cornerstone of rationality to an ephemeral idea, or a shadow that the hyperreal attempts to solidify.

In other words, the real objects in *Invisible Monsters* can only be defined by their copies. Something is only real if it can be reproduced. Palahniuk describes the décor of a mansion that McFarland, Alexander, and Kelley are visiting as supposed potential buyers, though they are really there to pilfer prescription drugs<sup>4</sup>. In describing the contents of this mansion, McFarland observes: "The rubrum lilies in the enameled vases are real, not silk. The cream-colored drapes are silk, not polished cotton. Mahogany is not pine stained to look like mahogany. No pressed-glass chandeliers posing as cut crystal. The leather is not vinyl" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 23).

Baudrillard sees real objects as produced through

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<sup>4</sup> McFarland, Alexander, and Kelley steal mostly female hormones for Alexander as she is changing genders. McFarland and Alexander also steal mood altering drugs so Alexander can numb herself to human emotion and make money selling them illegally on the street.

association with the hyperreal object, (Baudrillard, *Simulacra & Simulation* 2) since the hyperreal object is more real to the average American than the truly real mahogany or silk. In the novel, there is no difference between what is physically real and what is simulated. As Baudrillard notes, if one tries to simulate a robbery it becomes evident that "there is no 'objective' difference: the gestures, the signs are the same as for a real robbery, the signs do not lean on one side or another. To the established order they are always of the order of the real" (*Simulacra & Simulation* 20). A fake robbery will elicit the same response as a real robbery because it appears to be the same even as polished cotton will pass for silk. Since there is no conceivable difference between the real and the simulation, the simulation is judged with the same rules and criteria as the supposed real.

A similar occurrence arises in describing Cotrell's house that McFarland burns down on Cotrell's wedding day. Palahniuk writes, "What's burning down is a re-creation of a period revival house patterned after a copy of a copy of a copy of a mock-Tudor big manor house. It's a hundred generations removed from anything original, but the truth is aren't we all?" (*Invisible Monsters* 14). Cotrell lives

in a reproduction of a period home instead of a period home, which is itself a copy of a home made within the period it evokes. The original is rejected, untraceable, and even nonexistent, so what is left is rather a plurality of images and a mass of information that "decenter" the self who now responds on a more rational or logical level rather than on a sensual or emotional level. It does not matter anymore that Cotrell's home is a copy of a fake Tudor manor. What matters is that it appears to be a Tudor manor. The original Tudor holds no more credence than the mediocre copy. Referencing Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*<sup>5</sup>, Sadie Plant<sup>6</sup> observes, "The spectacle is a society which continually declares: 'Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear.' A world in which such circularity dominates all social experience is impoverished; only the commodity can exist, and as

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<sup>5</sup> Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* is a collection of theses regarding a culture that is inebriated by mass media and the interested messages that the media push the masses to conform to. A prevalent and influential text of the Situationist movement, *The Society of the Spectacle*, in a way, seems to serve as a manifesto of the Situationist movement.

<sup>6</sup> Plant's book, *The Most Radical Gesture*, is an in depth study of Situationist thought and its influence on major artistic and theoretical movements such as cultural studies and Postmodernism.

representations of the whole social world become increasingly tangible, the 'real consumer becomes a consumer of illusions'" (Plant 13). Not only is the reproduction of the Tudor home twice removed from the original, but also Palahniuk's characters are thrice removed, consuming not a genuine Tudor home, nor a reproduction, but an illusion of a reproduction. Palahniuk's characters see this copy of a copy of a Tudor, a far removed representation, and accept it as the illusion that holds up the spectacle that is their reality.

Of particular interest in looking at hyperreality, or the spectacle, is the scene in which McFarland is alone in a hotel room in Seattle while Alexander and Kelley sell prescription drugs on the street. Because she has shot off her jaw she is unable to speak to them. She longs to be touched again by Kelley and feels an intense jealousy towards Alexander because she has Kelley's affection. Instead of communicating her pain to Alexander or Kelley, she watches a late night talk show on television. In this scene, the divide then between fiction and truth crumbles. With the constant recycling and regeneration of images, information, and ideas like life itself seem indistinguishable from a film. Whether the talk show

guest's story is true or not makes no difference. Gwen, the guest of whom I will explain more momentarily, is satisfied and the viewers are as well. Both are surrounded by their own created reality and there is nothing outside of the talk show that any of its participants can recognize much less meaningfully know and interact with.

Baudrillard attributed this type of immersion in hyperreality as a particularly American phenomenon. For Baudrillard, America is the example of hyperreality in its highest form. He comments in an interview: "We [Europeans] find it difficult to de-subjectivize ourselves, to de-concentrate ourselves completely. They [Americans] do this very well. Cinema exists as a screen, not a stage; it calls for a different kind of acting. You're surrounded by a perpetual montage of sound and vision" (Gane 134). From this perspective, there is no conceivable difference in America between acting and living. With the camera, the movie set is a closed circuit. Why else is McFarland so interested in the story that the talk show guest shares on national television? Why else is Gwen so interested in watching herself tell her story on the monitor? The audience never sees or looks for an escape from the taped image but only the world created by the camera. The

audience of a live play sees the stage, sees the lights, sees the rest of the audience, sees the green neon exits signs and knows the play is posed, scripted, and inhabits a particular space and time. They see the play made before their very eyes. Documentary or fairy tale, the film maintains its sovereignty. The audience sees only the product, not the process. With the film, the illusion of a world outside of the spectacle is eliminated in a way that live theatre cannot achieve.

Brandy says, 'It helps to know you're not any more responsible for how you look than a car is,' Brandy says. 'You're a product just as much'

--Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 217

#### Human Subjects as Products of the Terminal Network

To facilitate this closed-circuited spectacle, all four characters of *Invisible Monsters* slowly detach themselves from time and space and from origins and referents. Alexander, Kelley, and McFarland struggle to

forget their past and their roots by continually renaming themselves, taking on new roles while they travel together, and divorcing themselves from their families and their memories. Cotrell and McFarland study their textbooks for modeling school in the mock living rooms and dining rooms of furniture floors in major department stores. Space itself becomes irrelevant when all the characters travel across the United States with a mere sentence to describe each move. The dilemma internal to these characters becomes that of virtual time and space, of the lack of origins and referents and the assumption that there is a real that has been conditioned in humans just as Paul Virilio<sup>7</sup> sees mass mediated society as struggling with the idea of instant communication (*Open Sky* 37). These virtualized forms of time and space become the practical reality of human subjects. While Gerard Raulet<sup>8</sup> interprets

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Virilio's *Open Sky* explores how communication technologies have not only manipulated humanity's sense of time and space, but their perception of themselves and their world. He calls for a revolt against the repressive powers of mass communication, advocating a world that is not only concerned with the welfare of nature but also of the urban environment polluted with controlling misperceptions of advanced communication systems.

<sup>8</sup> Raulet's essay, "The New Utopia: Communication Technologies", looks at the possible empty utopia of a society with highly advanced communication systems where



this derealization or virtualization of time and space in more practical applications in explaining market capitalism, his views are similar to Paul Virilio's.

Raulet states:

derealization is a function of reason's claim to universality and takes on a new character with the twist capitalism gives to rationalization. With the "invention" of the general equivalent, the condition of exchange, all things become interchangeable, deprived of their particular qualities and therefore derealized. Value becomes separated from substance, exchange value from use value. (Raulet 40)

In this case, disconnections between appearance and content, reality and simulation blur both form and boundaries. This lack of distinction and separation results in a transparency of the world as simulacra, a copy without an original. Without a referent, a connection to reality or to an original, existence lies only in surface appearance. Baudrillard determines America and Americans to be those that are most accustomed to the life of

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historical connections are dissolved in what he calls the "era of simulacra".

simulation and the prevalence of appearances, saying, "This is the only country which gives you the opportunity to be so brutally naïve: things, faces, skies, and deserts are expected to be simply what they are. This is the land of the 'just as it is'" (Baudrillard, *America* 28).

Baudrillard depicts Americans as content or, at least, accustomed to accepting each phenomenon at face value and as equally satisfied with a label that conveniently categorizes all phenomena into knowable terms.

In *Invisible Monsters*, the characters are seen as lifeless conduits of consumerism and clones of this universal culture. Instead of upholding the human form and the human spirit as the pinnacle of creation, humankind is being reduced to a product, a function, or a genome. If there is no soul and no morals then the human becomes nothing more than a pile of information, a DNA string, or a conglomerate of consumer products and media images. When Cotrell shoots Alexander, McFarland reflects on the value of human life.

What I tell myself is that gush of red pumping out of Brandy's bullet hole is less like blood than it's some sociopolitical tool. The thing about being cloned from all those shampoo

commercials, well, that goes for me and Brandy Alexander too. Shotgunning anybody in this room would be the moral equivalent of killing a car, a vacuum cleaner, a Barbie doll. Erasing a computer disk. Burning a book. Probably that goes for killing anybody in the world. We're all such products. (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 12)

As Baudrillard points out, humans, as a species, have not progressed into a super species that transcends, but rather a species that is broken down to its lowest common denominator: the subhuman (*Impossible Exchange* 35). Here, Palahniuk's characters demonstrate that the dividing line between the human and the product, or the human and the image, has disappeared just as the difference between true and false has vanished to create a simulacrum.

The hyperrealism of *Invisible Monsters* pushes the characters to feel their state as reproductions, as the equivalent of any mechanically produced product in a culture which co-opts all radical interventions, by turning them into ahistorical styles and surfaces of appearance. Alexander consoles McFarland by pointing out the mundaneness of everything that McFarland could experience.

Up under my veil, I finger the wet poking stub of a tongue from some vandalized product. The doctors suggested using part of my small intestine to make my throat longer. They suggested carving the shinbones, the fibulas of this human product I am, shaping the bones and grafting them to build me, build the product, a new jawbone [....] 'You're a product of our language,' Brandy says, 'and how our laws are and how we believe our God wants us. Every bitty molecule about you has already been thought out by some million people before you,' she says. 'Anything you can do is boring and old and perfectly okay. You're safe because you're so trapped inside your culture. Anything you can conceive of is fine because you can conceive of it. You can't imagine any way to escape. There's no way to get out,' Brandy says. 'The world,' Brandy says, 'is your cradle and your trap.'" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 218-9)

Here, identity is shown to be only a fiction, the kind that Gerard Raulet would attribute to the "intersection of the individual and social games" (Raulet 44). In the Western

Humanistic tradition, the human is made to believe in his or her own individualism, for without a feeling of control, or purpose in human life, the subject drowns in boredom, uselessness, and despair.

But in the Postmodern world, freedom, itself, which was once fought for brutally, lives on only as an idea. What does freedom matter when contentment is dispersed through the very network of the hyperreal, through magazines, television shows, commercials, and anonymous charities that take donations online. This terminal network where the functions of mass media travel through human terminals, controls the human; instead of the human controlling the network. Paul Virilio cites Franz Kafka who comments on cinema. Kafka contends: "The speed of the movements and the rapid change of images force you to look continuously from one to the next. Your sight does not master the pictures, it's the pictures that master your sight. They flood your consciousness. The cinema involves putting your eyes into uniform, when before they were naked" (Virilio, *Art & Fear* 84). Likewise, the reader cannot determine a clear cut answer or definitive meaning of *Invisible Monsters*. No longer the humanistic individual who reads and finds the definitive answer, nor the author

who can be understood by his own life, human subjects have realized that they are not train conductors or even train tracks, but train stations. While Scott Bukatman sees in cyberpunk fiction an empowered subject within electronic technology (21), Palahniuk sees a much more psychologically conflicted subject struggling to reconcile a sense of agency with the docile body, humanistic individualism with human subjectivity. Even though Alexander seems to get closest to a compromise, she still looks for love and acceptance from others before passively completing her gender reassignment surgeries.

In *Invisible Monsters*, humankind is destined to serial propagation where reproduction is not enough anymore. Instead there is renewal and recycling that hints at the clone with the collapse of all the characters into a single identity. While on top of the Space Needle, Kelley, here named Seth, and McFarland write messages to the future on postcards that Alexander reads and then throws down to the city below. "Seth writes and Brandy reads. *You have to keep recycling yourself.* I write and Brandy reads. *Nothing of me is original. I am the combined effort of everybody I've ever known*" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 104). Each character becomes a little bit of everyone

until all characters are the same, until conformity has evened the field across all barriers. The cloning of this singular type of human becomes, for Baudrillard, "the last stage of history" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 99). Baudrillard also points out that biological cloning has yet to catch up with the cultural and mental cloning that is already well on its way.

It is culture which clones us, and mental cloning precedes biological cloning by a long way. It is the acquired characteristic which clones us today culturally, under the banner of *la pensée unique*. It is through ideas, ways of life, the cultural context and milieu that our innate differences are most surely canceled out. It is through the school system, the media system, the mass culture and information systems, that human beings become copies of each other. And it is this *de facto* cloning - social cloning, the industrial cloning of persons and things - which engenders the biological idea of the genome and genetic cloning, which is a mere ratification of mental and behavioural cloning. (Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange* 37)

Thus the human subject is the product of a culture as much as a toothbrush is the product of a factory. Alexander again tries to console McFarland saying: " 'It helps to know you're not any more responsible for how you look than a car is [...] You're a product just as much. A product of a product of a product' " (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 217).

While Palahniuk and Baudrillard hint at the possibility of a positive postmodern subject, I feel that this view of the human as product, subject, or terminal is not the negative term of the humanistic individual but rather an existence at the extremes. Bukatman voices a similar opinion about this neo-agency available in a terminal existence saying: "The rhetoric of the genre [science fiction] deconstructs the transparent figurations of language and so refuses the subject a fixed cite of identification. Such a deconstruction does not point to an *annihilation* of subjectivity, but rather to the limits of the existing paradigms" (Bukatman 180). Palahniuk's characters still struggle with the desire to be an individual apart from the network, for the Situationist revolt of the proletariat that would free the masses from the spectacle, unlike artists such as Andy Warhol who



embraces his mediated image and plays with the idea of reproduction and renewal in his own prints. As Neal Gabler points out, Warhol is not the humanistic individual, "the tortured artist wrestling art from his soul in a lonely battle with his daemon" (Gabler 84-5). Instead, Warhol celebrates the network and uses it to further his own views on art and society. Similarly, Baudrillard advocates that humanity accept the simulacrum, forgetting about revolt, and about regaining human autonomy. Humanity's object state within the spectacle is a relief. Sadie Plant quotes Baudrillard's support of the object state: "[T]he object does not believe in its own desire; the object does not live off the illusion of its own desire; the object has no desire. It does not believe that anything belongs to it as property, and it entertains no fantasies of reappropriation or autonomy" (Plant 165). Palahniuk's characters are not as comfortable with seeing themselves as objects as Warhol and Baudrillard are. While they feel themselves to be objects, they are not ready to give up their feeling of autonomy or control and still hold to the idea that they can revolt and escape the spectacle that surrounds them. The characters of *Invisible Monsters* are still on unstable

ground as they have yet to negotiate and situate themselves in the new subjectivity that the terminal network requires.

We're so trapped that any way  
we could imagine to escape  
would be another part of the  
trap. Anything we want we're  
trained to want.

--Palahniuk, *Invisible  
Monsters* 259

#### The Terminal Network as without Escape

Both McFarland and Alexander want to break from the spectacle to live a supposed "real life". McFarland rejects her celebrity and desires to be an unnoticed terminal of the network. She says: "I wanted the everyday reassurance of being mutilated. The way a crippled deformed birth-defected disfigured girl can drive her car with the windows open and not care how the wind makes her hair look" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 286). McFarland tries to eradicate her role as a model within the spectacle which forces an obedience to a role, a physical ideal that her viewers aspire to, by becoming a part of the masses,

making herself ugly, disfiguring herself so that no one could bare to look at her face. Shooting her jaw off does not serve as a suicide attempt but as a means towards separating herself from the airbrushed perfection of the hyperreal, of being a model by profession as well as a Baudrillardian model. However, being an individual, being different or apart from the system is an unattainable desire. Alexander, rejected as the boy he was, tries to become his sister in an attempt to get attention and affection from an adoring public. McFarland, isolated by her own beauty, shoots her jaw off to make herself ugly enough that no one will aspire to be her. She hopes to constantly cover her face, stay inside, and refrain from communicating via writing as she no longer has to speak. She wants to be a part of the anonymous everyday monotony of serial life in what she views as being outside of the spectacle.

Alexander's attempted break from the system is her process of changing from male to female. Not knowing that McFarland is her sister, Alexander admits to McFarland why she elects to go through the process of a sex change.

"I'm only doing this because it's just the biggest mistake I can think of to make. It's

stupid and destructive, and anybody you ask will tell you I'm wrong. That's why I have to go through with it." Brandy says, "Don't you see? Because we're so trained to do life the right way. *To not make mistakes.*" Brandy says, "I figure, the bigger the mistake looks, the better chance I'll have to break out and live a real life." (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 258)

Her attempts to escape the system only show how trapped she really is. Her surgeries aim to *appear* to be huge mistakes. Her entire revolution is based on her appearance and how her gender registers to others. In the spectacle or the simulacrum, whether or not Alexander was originally a man or woman is irrelevant. What is important is only what she appears to be. Alexander becomes an example of how the network itself works. She knows she is an unoriginal product produced by everything around her. She has internalized the functions of the network, exploiting its emphasis on appearance alone, and is realizing it by becoming a woman. By realizing the network she escapes the illusion that the network perpetuates just as Baudrillard points out that humanity must materialize and realize the world, for example, via science or technology, in order to

escape the illusion of the simulacrum (Gane 184). Bukatman actually sees an agency in human subjectivity with the joining of the biological and the technological in the human body that pushes beyond illusion. He states:

The subject is the *body*, mutable and mutated.  
The subject is the *mind*, thinking and cognizing.  
The subject is its *memory*, recalling history and experience. The body in science fiction can be read symbolically, but it is a transparent symbol (as well as a symbol of its own transparent status), an immanent object, signifying nothing beyond itself. It is literally objectified; everything is written upon its surface. In the era of terminal identity, the body has become a machine, a machine that no longer exists in dichotomous opposition to the 'natural' and unmediated existence of the subject. What is at stake in science fiction is no longer the fusion of beings and the immorality of the soul, but the fusion of being and electronic technology in a new, hard-wired subjectivity. (Bukatman 244)

Simulation is no longer an abstract idea to Alexander as she takes on the characteristics and stylistic qualities of

the spectacle and tries to make them her own. She has acted out her own simulation by materializing the network in herself in renaming herself and other characters, and altering her gender and appearance. Alexander does not push herself to connect to her nonexistent soul or inner being but to manipulate her appearance as she realizes that that is what the terminal network recognizes. She propels herself closer to a terminal identity than a humanistic one by discrediting the very notion of the soul. McFarland and Alexander are trying to break from a pre-determined social role that the spectacle creates for them, only to fall within a different role. Yet, they cannot escape the system of the spectacle because even the role of the deviant is necessary to and, as Michel Foucault would argue, is part of the system.

Alexander, though, is well aware that whatever she chooses to do, there is no escaping the cultural system that has mentally cloned its human subjects. She elects for a sex change because she does not want one. But does doing something that she does not want to do mean she has broken out of the network? That she can discover anything new? Alexander herself says: "We're so trapped [in our culture] that any way we could imagine to escape would be

just another part of the trap. Anything we want, we're trained to want" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 259). By this logic, Alexander is trained to not want to be a girl. Her becoming a girl does not change the fact that she does not want to be female, nor does it change the "trap" that society has laid in defining what Alexander wants or does not want. Though she is still by genetic standards a man, she appears to be a woman. She dresses like a woman, talks like a woman, acts like a woman, appears to be a woman, and is recognized as a woman. Even though she is a simulated woman, in the simulacrum she functions as a woman and her appearance and acceptance in society as female makes her a female.

Alexander adores McFarland for her attempt to separate herself from the system with the permanent act of shooting her own jaw off and refusing reconstructive surgery. Because McFarland wears a veil to cover her horrendous face, Alexander upholds her as the exception to the network. In the simulacrum her veil causes difficulties in determining who she is. Alexander describes McFarland as "[a] sphinx. A mystery. A blank. Unknown. Undefined. Unknowable. Indefinable. Those were all the words Brandy used to describe me in my veils. Not just a story that

goes and then, and then, and then, and then until you die"  
(Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 261).

Actually, McFarland's own mysterious aura is a part of the network, a part of the mass media. The catastrophe that is her disfigurement is only another effect.

Palahniuk says the same of his own novel that he does of McFarland's facial deformity. "Don't expect this to be the kind of story that goes: and then, and then, and then.

What happens here will have more of that fashion magazine feel, a *Vogue* or a *Glamour* magazine chaos with numbers on every second or fifth or third page" (*Invisible Monsters* 20). Thus mass media effects not only manifest themselves in the characters' behaviors and appearances, but equally in the construction of the novel itself.

The character McFarland, *Invisible Monsters*, and fashion magazines, are all chaotic terminals in a simulated reality. The experience of the simulacrum that Palahniuk's characters share harbors the same fears and feelings that Baudrillard notes of the freeway system of Los Angeles which he describes as "the only real society or warmth here [in Los Angeles], this collective propulsion, this compulsion - a compulsion of lemmings plunging suicidally together. Why should I tear myself away to revert to an



individual trajectory, a vain sense of responsibility?"

(Baudrillard, *America* 53-4). Any sense of participation or community comes with following the flow of the network.

The simulacrum that Palahniuk's characters inhabit is confined within the network that encompasses all possible combinations of characteristics or effects. If the escape itself is a part of the system, then the system is closed. Baudrillard says of American society, "This entire society, including its active, productive part - everyone - is running straight ahead, because they have lost the formula for stopping" (Baudrillard, *America* 39). Propelled ever forward in the loop, the freeways of Los Angeles, the human subject finds solace in conformity. McFarland gives up fame for serial existence and Alexander is reluctant to complete her surgery, to break away from what society has conditioned her to want and to accept. The media flow through the network terminal as it does through the simulacrum where an end to a cyclical existence seems hard to fathom. Baudrillard's terms simulacrum and network terminal and my term, terminal state, work to describe the human experience in Postmodern mass mediated societies, but simulacrum stresses very different aspects of that existence than does network terminal or terminal state.

The term simulacrum stresses an existence without an ability to differentiate between the real and the simulated on a surface level model of existence. The terms network terminal and terminal state stress the circularity of this closed-circuited existence where meaningful exchange cannot take place. Baudrillard comments on the circular nature of mass media and its lack of escape, saying:

The media carry meaning and countermeaning, they manipulate in all directions at once, nothing can control this process, they are the vehicle for the simulation internal to the system and the simulation that destroys the system, according to an absolutely Möbian and circular logic - and it is exactly like this. There is no alternative to this, no logical resolution. Only a logical *exacerbation* and a catastrophic resolution.

(Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 84)

Surface appearances of the spectacle fail to satisfy McFarland and Alexander's struggles with their ideas of individualism and the reality of subjectivity. Until this "catastrophic resolution" that Baudrillard predicts, what then do Palahniuk's characters cling to after appearances, and internalizing and realizing the functions of the

network of mass media, fail them? Without definitive meaning where are their efforts invested?

If the human subject as manifested in *Invisible Monsters* is merely a terminal of the network, panning back to see how the network homogenizes could serve as a path to an answer. According to Takis Fotopoulos, who looks at mass media as a catalyst of market capitalism, the mass media have both internal and external controls that aid in the process of homogenizing their viewers. Externally, the value of competition in the market economy fosters uniformity since, while companies in the same market are competing for sales or ratings, they still harbor the same goal, and will choose the most effective way to achieve that goal. Internally, ownership and individual competition serve to homogenize the human subject as well. Whoever owns the major broadcast stations owns the right to manipulate the media towards their own aims (Fotopoulos 49-50). The market economy itself with its value of competition and its drive towards high profits and efficiency, produce cookie cutter everythings across the nation and the world. As Fotopoulos argues, the market economy is "making culture simpler, with cities becoming more and more alike, people all over the world listening to

the same music, watching the same soap operas on TV, buying the same brands of consumer goods" (43). Fotopoulos points out that the common goal of making money has made the consumer a part of the serially produced product it consumes. For Baudrillard, the consumer's tragedy lies in the fact that they have not largely internalized or realized that everything they see, consume, or believe, is a surface phenomenon that cannot be exchanged for meaning, for content, or for something other than the spectacle. Baudrillard states:

All Western faith and good faith became engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could be exchanged for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange - God of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say can be reduced to the signs that constitute faith? Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer itself anything but a gigantic simulacrum - not unreal, but a simulacrum, that is to say never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or

circumference. (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 5-6)

Though Baudrillard and Fotopoulos have similar interpretations of homogeneity in the human experience, they have different points and aims. While Fotopoulos pushes readers to be inquisitive and look for where power lies in mass media and in market capitalism, Baudrillard uses this homogeneity to support his idea that the simulacrum is a closed circuit void of meaning or reality. Baudrillard does not examine power structures that exist in the simulacrum or in its creation. His own analysis of postmodernity is equally concerned with and focused on surface appearances as are the cultures he critiques rather than the political and economic forces of society that allow and perpetuate these cultures, marking Baudrillard's own analysis as unable to escape the spectacle it describes.

It's funny, but when you  
think about even the biggest  
tragic fire it's just a  
sustained chemical reaction.  
The oxidation of Joan of Arc.

--Palahniuk, *Invisible  
Monsters* 15

### The Loss of Affect and Morality in the Terminal State

With the disconnection between appearance and the thing itself and the globalization of cultural truths, what was once called genuine human feeling, or affect, no longer exists. The characters of *Invisible Monsters* do not feel any pity or compassion for one another just as American society has no regrets pawning off its universal culture on other countries. The characters' only experience with pain is their own loneliness perpetuated by their inability to feel a human connection or a meaningful relationship with each other. Throughout the novel, McFarland, a model, is cued to feel emotion with the clicking flash of a camera. Even in describing her own frustrations she must use short phrases separated by the word "flash" as a type of crutch. She feels through the medium of photography as Cotrell

feels through the medium of television. Cotrell, when doing her infomercials, stares at the cameras with such a longing to be accepted while the studio audience prefers to look at themselves in the monitor than at Cotrell, the attractive assistant in the infomercial they are supposed to be watching. After witnessing her own brother being shot and bleeding to death in the foyer of her ex-best friend's mansion, McFarland feels no guilt, sadness, sympathy, or pain for her brother, but reverts to her own disconnection from genuine feelings when she has a chance to experience them first hand.

It's not that I'm some detached lab animal just conditioned to ignore violence, but my first instinct is maybe it's not too late to dab club soda on the bloodstain. Most of my adult life so far has been me standing on seamless paper for a raft of bucks per hour, wearing clothes and shoes, my hair done and some famous fashion photographer telling me how to feel. Him yelling, Give me lust, baby. Flash. Give me Malice. Flash. (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 13)

Like McFarland, who needs a camera to feel, Kelley links life with the television, and his own crying to a song on the radio shows the divide between human emotion and machine and blurs the need for differentiation. Even McFarland sees the influence of the song on Kelley as well as the female hormones she and Alexander continue to secretly feed Kelley. During their travels across the United States, Alexander sees a joke (and possibly a comfort as she is altering herself with female hormones) in secretly feeding female hormones to Kelley. McFarland uses this as a way to disfigure him so she can stop being attracted to him. McFarland relishes in noticing Kelley's changing body type and oversensitivity that results from taking large doses of female hormones.

Driving, driving, Seth says, 'Did you ever think about life as a metaphor for television?' Our rule is that when Seth's driving, no radio. What happens is a Dionne Warwick song comes on, and Seth starts to cry so hard, crying those big Estinyl tears, shaking with those big Provera sobs. If Dionne Warwick comes on singing a Burt Bacharach song, we just have to pull over or it's



sure we'll get car wrecked. (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 77)

Here is the release, the moment of pleasure and fulfillment in a void of human emotion. Being rejected by his family, fired from his job, and Kelley's own frustration with his aging and his homosexuality cannot hold a candle to a single song broadcast to the masses. The human subject feels it can release its semblance of control over itself and just absorb the song, show, or film. As Baudrillard admits in an interview about the cinematic experience, that when watching a film, it is "extraordinarily pleasurable to sit for three hours in front of something that, well, tells you a story. I don't give a damn about the ideological context of the film. I just sat there, totally absorbed" (Gane 33). For Palahniuk and Baudrillard, being aware of and interacting with the media then becomes equally, if not more important or intimate, than one's relations with other people in the socialization process. When McFarland looks for comfort she finds it in the flash of a camera, the late night talk show, the anonymity produced by disfigurement but never in her own family or in others like Cotrell or Kelley. Similarly, Cotrell is not satisfied with her life as a man and decides to become a female super model.

Instead of looking for acceptance from her Texan socialite parents, she depends on the television audience's approval. As Baudrillard states: "Everywhere socialization is measured by the exposure to media messages. Whoever is underexposed to the media is desocialized or virtually asocial" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 80). Everything in *Invisible Monsters* equates back to some element of the media. The book is structured like a fashion magazine, the characters invest themselves in television and radio instead of family and their pasts; the houses are described as movie sets; McFarland's feelings are linked to camera flashes, and humans become clones of commercials. Human subjectivity in a terminal existence requires the joining of electronic technology with the human as Bukatman claims; however, Palahniuk's characters have not yet been able to negotiate a healthy or satisfying existence that blends human with machine.

Like Palahniuk's characters, twenty-first century human subjects invest their entirety in the power of the media to arouse any feeling whatsoever. Being a spectator of the mass media no longer means watching images in order to relate to the characters but in order to relate to oneself. Humans do not have to share their pain with other

people anymore but can merely share their pain with the camera. Paul Virilio states:

The story goes that Rudolf Schwarzkogler actually died after a bout of castration he inflicted on himself during one of his performance pieces that took place without a single viewer in the huis clos between the artist and a video camera. This is TERMINAL ART that no longer requires anything more than the showdown between a tortured body and an automatic camera to be accomplished.

(Virilio, *Art & Fear* 42-3)

For Virilio, terminal art is art in a closed circuit. There is no need for gallery exhibits or museums since art can be created in the loop that is filming and watching. Just as Schwarzkogler separates himself from a live audience or a larger society, so too do Palahniuk's characters avoid human connection. The simulated human removes him or herself from humanity by negating the importance of human relationships, even the original relationship between mother and child. McFarland, Alexander, and Kelley clearly divorce themselves from their parents. Their origins have rejected them and they in turn

have rejected their origins by refusing further contact and alienating themselves from their pasts and their families.

The human subject as represented in *Invisible Monsters* then has withdrawn itself from human interaction as existing in the terminal state requires human subjects to find a new way to interact as a terminal of a network rather than an autonomous individual. The human subject can no longer fathom the needs of other humans as it feels no need for a physical or emotional closeness to others. As Baudrillard argues of the once social and now terminal subject, the human subject's "mental horizon has been reduced to the manipulation of his images and screens. He has everything he needs [....] It is through the networks that this loss of affection for oneself and for others has come about" (Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* 42-3). For Baudrillard, the human subject, made in the image of no one, has no soul for God and Satan to battle over and without a Final Judgment there are no real rules (*Impossible Exchange* 47). In this lack of physical and moral interaction, electronic interaction becomes a substitute where television replaces conversation and the internet eradicates the need to ever leave one's home. This is a new existence and environment that Bukatman also

notices in the film, *Blade Runner*, which he argues depicts "a future in which subjectivity and emotional affect are the signs of the nonhuman" (Bukatman 131). In trying to negotiate agency in the terminal state, affect apparently is the first strictly human or organic trait that is eliminated in order to assimilate to the terminal network that defines the human subject.

During their road trip across America, Kelley, McFarland, and Alexander not only divorce themselves from family and past, but from any singular identity. The body is not connected to some moral or soul. Freedom itself needs only the body in the simulacrum. The liberated person, in Baudrillard's mind, is not free in an ideal sense but is rather a person that "changes spaces, who circulates, who changes sex, clothes, and habits according to fashion, rather than morality, who changes opinions not as his conscious dictates but in response to opinion polls" (Baudrillard, *America* 96). Palahniuk's characters exert this Baudrillardian freedom. For instance, Kelley teeters back and forth from police detective to criminal and is renamed every time he and McFarland and Alexander change cities and rental cars. Kelley changes roles as easily as changing his clothes as both are equally based on

appearances alone. He switches between mental retardation and normalcy, heterosexuality and homosexuality, and changes his accent and nationality in each situation and in each different city. His existence lies in little pieces of a surface identity not in a humanistic whole individual who is seemingly complete and united under a single existence. There is no moral or internal identity that draws in spectators, but rather an ever changing identity formed of simulated characteristics. While touring an open house, Kelley simulates a seizure to distract the real estate agent while McFarland and Alexander steal prescription drugs from the home's bathroom. In this instance, Kelley becomes a special effect instead of a definitive individual with a concrete identity.

Cruelty and pain themselves become special effects, a scientific process. After discovering that her boyfriend cheated on her with Cotrell while she was in the hospital with her jaw injury, McFarland sets Cotrell's house on fire and Cotrell herself is set aflame. McFarland rationalizes what in reality would be atrocious, a calculated process that does not call upon questions of morality. McFarland says, "It's funny, but when you think about even the biggest tragic fire it's just a sustained chemical

reaction. The oxidation of Joan of Arc" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 15). Good and evil, happiness and despair do not function in the hyperreal state that the characters of *Invisible Monsters* live in. Baudrillard explores how morality plays out in the hyperreal as opposed to the accepted humanistic view of a rational reality by setting each up as two different universes. He states:

Just as a certain set of phenomenon are governed by classical physics, and another reality (though is it still a reality?) belongs to the field of relativity and quantum physics, so there is a moral reality and order of judgement which obeys the precepts of classical metaphysics and the distinction between Good and Evil, and another mental (micro-) physics which is no longer of that same order at all: a universe of relativity and no distinction between Good and Evil, where the question of freedom does not even arise. Here again, is this a 'reality' or is the only 'reality' the one subject to moral judgement, and to the imperative which grounds this same reality principle - leaving us, in other words, with a

perfectly tautological definition? (Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange* 97-8)

In this case, the simulation or the hyperreal is not inferior to previous classical ideas of the real, but merely a variant, a modification of a widely accepted world view. Changing one's perspective means changing one's idea of reality. With the ability to recognize comes the ability to reconstruct. Ian Mitroff and Warren Bennis, who look specifically at television's role in upholding the simulacrum, state "Our minds are thus not only built to represent reality 'as it is' but also to represent or distort reality as we'd 'like it to be'" (Mitroff & Bennis 65). Either way, for Baudrillard, reality has become only the hyperreal. If in Western society, humankind was made in the image of God and God is the Good incarnate, what is humankind made in the image of in the time of the simulacrum where there is no Good or Evil? Herein lies the identity crisis of the postmodern era. Humanity cannot fathom the idea that they are copies without an original and an effect without a meaningful moral content.

In *Invisible Monsters*, Good and Evil have lost their boundary line where they are no longer opposites but portions of the same idea, rendering them morality



irrelevant. Baudrillard uses the analogy of an iceberg where the tenth above water is Good and the nine tenths below the water is Evil (*Impossible Exchange* 94-5). He illustrates that they are both a part of the same iceberg and are only loosely divided by the water line. Each portion can equally switch between Good and Evil and they both eventually melt to form the water that surrounds it. If the difference between Good and Evil is melted away, as Baudrillard argues, then what point is there in making the difference between the two and trying to practice the morally right? Pushing Baudrillard's argument even further, it appears to me that if burning Joan of Arc is reduced to chemistry, then morality has ceased to exist in the hyperreal state of *Invisible Monsters*. If these supposed opposites are interchangeable and simultaneous then how are they defined if not through difference? It all becomes a play of appearance in the spectacle with the absence of a meaning behind binaries such as Good and Evil. None of the characters of *Invisible Monsters* appear as good or evil despite some "deviant" behavior. There is a level of ambivalence towards traditional value systems where they neither support nor reject gender alterations, shootings, kidnapping, and drug dealing but merely state very matter-

of-factly what transpires throughout their lives.

Substance becomes irrelevant because it no longer exists or is even valued as an ideal in society. Instead, Good is created as an effect of certain simulated actions. Ian Mitroff and Warren Bennis, who question the ideals of American society and their contradictory practical manifestations, speculate: "If entertainment is not the norm throughout all of our society, then acting dominates over content. But if so, why shouldn't youngsters then follow the lead of our current presidents where apparently looking and sounding good are more important than ability or content - or even the character to govern" (Mitroff & Bennis 20). Taking on Baudrillard's view of Good and Evil and Mitroff and Bennis' argument that appearance trumps content in mass mediated America, morality and spirituality themselves are reduced to effects, coded behaviors filtered by a studio audience just as Palahniuk's characters are reduced to products.

With Palahniuk's characters "cloned from all those shampoo commercials" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 12) and the audiences of Cotrell and McFarland's infomercials identifying with the monitor screens rather than Cotrell and McFarland, it becomes evident that the outer appearance

of the human is smoothed out and perfected to mirror that of the television screen, the big screen, and the monitor. Baudrillard explains that in the simulacra, models are continually flashed at the masses: magazines with the perfect clothes, airbrushed seventeen-year-olds, a Jaguar XKE convertible, and television shows with the perfect girl-next-door. American society's fear is what drives the acceptance of the spectacle because if society rejects this hyperreality there is nothing left. Take away the French designer clothes, the professional make-up, the digital enhancements, the artificial lighting and what is left behind all these advertised models that the subject must aspire to become? Baudrillard states: "One can live with the idea of distorted truth. But their [humanity's and specifically Iconoclast's] metaphysical despair came from the idea that the image didn't conceal anything at all" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 5). If, as Baudrillard argues, there is no content behind these models, these advertisements, these media personalities, these clothes, this hairstyle then the spectacle has become merely a simulation of an ideal, the serial production of a nonexistent utopian model, the burnt layer of skin with no hot cocoa underneath. For Baudrillard, the media are not

some exterior driving force pushing its own influence on poor innocent humans but the collective effort of all its participants. He argues, the media are a complex network that includes its human actors and spectators immersed in the system that they create to fulfill their desires (*Impossible Exchange* 138). Perhaps, for Baudrillard, the creation of this complex media system is humanity fulfilling its own needs and creating its own destiny in the absence of a God or of fate that will provide for humankind. Creating this new destiny or existence is the overpowering conflict in *Invisible Monsters* as all the characters are still searching for contentment and acceptance that they struggle to locate between their terminal existence and their humanistic delusions.

CHAPTER TWO  
THE TERMINAL STATE: PLAY AND THE LOSS  
OF HISTORY AND HIERARCHY IN A  
CIRCULAR NETWORK

She named me Daisy St.

Patience and never wanted to

know the rightful name I

walked in the door with.

--Palahniuk, *Invisible  
Monsters* 173

The terminal state creates complications for the characters of *Invisible Monsters* as they still cling to humanistic ideas of individualism and symbolic meaning. The characters of *Invisible Monsters* are trying to negotiate an existence between the physical body and the screen as well as between humanistic individualism and terminal identity. A sense of history is absent from the terminal just as an individual identity becomes impossible when the system that works upon the terminals requires flexibility and fluctuation, that is, a veritable play of meaning and identity within the massive communication systems that the human subject functions within. This two-

dimensional existence, which harbors a vacancy of meaning, becomes evident in Chuck Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters* with three major issues that arise in the novel. These issues include the characters' relationships with their parents and their views of the God role, the importance or unimportance of history and the past, and the relationship between humans and television, especially their own projected image. The characters play with renaming and recreating new identities leaving those that their parents, or that God provided, as only another identity or possible role. A sense of history or a stable identity is lost in the terminal state as characters are always trying to push the past into the forgotten. The final major issue, that of human's relationship with television, is most evident in Cotrell's experiences filming her infomercial and Gwen's, a talk show guest's, behaviors while on air. The audiences of both Cotrell's and Gwen's shows are equally mesmerized by the television screen and the monitor. Their inability to communicate or interact with their audiences shows them to be terminals within a tiny reality loop, confined to desperately trying to realize their own existence instead of creating meaningful connections with other humans. Unlike many fictional characters that Scott Bukatman

analyzes from cyberpunk literature, Palahniuk's characters have not successfully integrated the mass media into their bodily experiences. Palahniuk's characters still cling to their physical body, to an empty hope of finding stable contentment, and to proving their own existence. These characters do, however, make the tentative first steps towards Bukatman's terminal identity, an existence where the subject is fully integrated and accustomed to its terminal role, by slowly divorcing themselves from a sense of history and recognizing their ability to "play" or manipulate the terminal network and their experiences within that network.

[Y]our folks are God. You  
love them and want to make  
them happy, but you still  
want to make up your own  
rules.

--Palahniuk, *Invisible  
Monsters* 173

## Eradicating the Privileged Role of Parent and God

The four major characters of *Invisible Monsters*, and perhaps especially Manus Kelley, wrestle with the idea of God and the past, which is most clearly manifested in the characters' relationships with their parents. Instead of calling into existence a unique individual, the terminal state of human subjects in the simulacrum creates an environment where identities always change and where there is no a priori definition of the self. While Kelley may be the most conflicted in regards to his parents as God figures, Alexander, McFarland, and Cotrell have their own issues with their pasts and families that distract them from living their lives in the present. Alexander, having been thrown out of her own home as a teenager under the false assumption that she is homosexual, is estranged from the family that she longs for. McFarland, though accepted by her parents, feels emotionally neglected because her parents are obsessed with gay rights after the supposed death of Alexander. Cotrell, however, seems less concerned with her ties to the past and her parents because she elected to have a sex change and her parents passively complied and funded the endeavor. However, she does harbor



and voice false claims of being rejected by her parents because of her sex change perhaps, in part, to feel that she shares common problems with the other characters of the novel. One must wonder, though, that Cotrell is as self-absorbed as she is at least in part because her parents show little concern for her, saying of her sex change that their son, Evan, could have what he wanted, that their tax return would cover the cost of the surgeries. This is such a casual brush off of a life-altering decision.

Let's take a moment to look closely at Kelley's issues with parentage and the God figure as both are contributing factors to identity construction and are often cited to connect with the past and specific value systems. While driving in the Pacific Northwest, Kelley, who in this part of the novel is named Seth, preaches his own ideas of parenthood and God. The text reads:

"And if you believe that we really have free will, then you know that God can't really control us," Seth says. Seth's hands are off the steering wheel and flutter around to make his point. "And since God can't control us," he says, "all God does is watch and change channels when He gets bored." Somewhere in heaven, you're

live on a video web site for God to surf.

Brandycam. (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 80)

In this scenario, Kelley paints himself and all his fellow humans as characters on television, of disembodied and insignificant images that God flips through with disregard. Kelley feels that he is only another channel, a simple terminal of a complex system that is controlled and dominated by some outside power, something as external and unreachable as God. Drawing the analogy even further, Kelley paints God as just another terminal of the system. God is disparaged by the fact that He cannot control humanity and is doomed to simply sit and change channels. This analogy of the television as how God does and does not control humanity is in line with Nick Stevenson's<sup>9</sup> explanations of Marshall McLuhan's views of electronic media's effects on humankind. He summarizes McLuhan's ideas, saying, "The mechanical reproduction of representations of the human body both abstracts from the sensuous nature of the human experience and provides a

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<sup>9</sup> Stevenson clearly criticizes McLuhan for approaching the effects of mass media on humanity's perceptions with a celebratory tone. Stevenson argues that McLuhan takes mass media out of context, neglecting social, political, and economic issues which is also a criticism that many claim against Jean Baudrillard as well.

breeding ground for sadistic desires and fantasies. Thus the alienating effect of modern forms of communication both produces pathological side effects and acts as a means of domination" (Stevenson 118). This new terminal subjectivity that Bukatman sees as "constructed at the computer screen or television screen" (Bukatman 9) is a difficult pill for both Stevenson and the character Kelley to swallow as neither see a satisfying sense of agency in this terminal existence. This characterizes Kelley's own frustrations and obsessions with feeling alone and insignificant in the face of God and, as we will see, with his own parents.

Kelley's interpretation of God shows Him as powerless, just as humans are posed as passive terminals. There is no God/human hierarchy. God does not hold a special place in the mass-mediated society that leaves God as another terminal, another image or screen, simply another powerless spectator. For theorists like Jean Baudrillard, who ascribe to a level of nihilism, meaning, if such a thing exists without a God that "precedes or transcends humanity", is negotiated by humankind (Lane 126). Richard Lane who, in his book, *Jean Baudrillard* summarizes and explores Baudrillard's main ideas, claims; "For

Baudrillard, postmodernity is about the play of 'appearances' and the destruction of symbolic meaning. Baudrillard argues that in the postmodern world we are involved in the empty and meaningless play of the media. Baudrillard calls the play of the media a 'transparency,' because all values become ultimately 'indifferent forms'" (Lane 126). Any level of agency that Palahniuk's characters feel they have is likewise meaningless, as they cannot escape the medium in which they function and never find meaning behind their constant manipulations of their appearances. The medium eventually dwindles values, morals, and actions into effects that cannot hold the weight and seriousness of the once longed for master narrative.

Alongside this obsession with God and the past comes an indifference towards these phenomena that Kelley recognizes as contradictory. McFarland summarizes Kelley's beliefs of the similarities between God and parents: "Jump to once a long time ago, Manus, my fiancé who dumped me, Manus Kelley, the police detective, he told me that your folks are like God because you want to know they're out there and you want them to approve of your life, still you only call them when you're in crisis and need something"

(Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 116). For Kelley, God and parents offer a feeling of assurance but at the same time, he does not want God or his parents to be with him on a regular basis, nor to have some type of history together. This distance between children and their parents is evident for all four of the major characters. Cotrell's parents do not even make an appearance in the novel until almost the last chapter and occupy a mere page. Kelley only speaks of his parents when his mother returns all his childhood mementos to him as she is clearing out the garage.

Alexander does not speak to her parents and even has the Rhea sisters, her guardians and funders of her surgeries, tell her parents that she died of AIDS. Even McFarland cannot bear to see her parents as every moment is consumed by the memory of her brother Brandon/Brandy. She feels that her parents, who give her boxes upon boxes of condoms for Christmas, do not know her at all. She, therefore, conceals the fact that she has disfigured herself and lies in all her letters to them pretending to continue her life as a catalog model.

Even with all this talk of God and family, values and morality, Kelley continues to break down humanistic ideals of humanity by posing that regardless of any loyalties one

feels towards God or family, ultimately a person just wants to make their own rules and live their own life. McFarland recounts what Kelley says, stating, "Manus once said that your folks are God. You love them and want to make them happy, but you still want to make up your own rules" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 202-3). Kelley later strongly asserts that "'First,' Manus says, 'Your parents, they give you your life, but then they try to give you their life'" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 210). The past in this sense is domineering and logocentric, calling for the child to follow God's rules and values or their parents' rules and values in life. For several theorists who view definitions or norms as social phenomena, such a single-tracked view of one's lived experiences is absurd. Edward Schiappa, in his book *Defining Reality*, looks specifically at how definitions are created by a group of people to create realities that forward certain interests. He explicates and quotes Hilary Putnam's<sup>10</sup> view:

"One true and complete description of 'the way the world is'" led to the search for a God's

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<sup>10</sup> Hilary Putnam is a philosopher who argues against the possibility of a singular perspective since each subject is limited to their experiences and the representation of those experiences within situated beliefs and language itself.

Eye point of view [....n]o such perspective is possible because we are limited to our experiences and our different ways of representing those experiences given historically situated beliefs and vocabularies: "There is no God's Eye point of view that we can know or usefully imagine; there are only various points of view of actual persons reflecting various interests and purposes that their descriptions and theories subserve." (Schiappa 42)

Following Schiappa's argument, any single viewpoint would fail to capture the complexity of human life and instead see the human as a stable resting point or a constant. Even Alexander's parents who obsess over her never find out that their son Brandon has turned into Brandy, or that their son is not homosexual. Brandon/Brandy actually caught gonorrhoea from being molested by Kelley, who was the police detective investigating Alexander's accident with the hairspray can that exploded and burned her face. Even parents, Kelley's equivalent to God, are incapable of creating a metanarrative that explains their own son's life. Neither God nor the parent can shed light on what is primary, real, or true as their perceptions are as valid

and contrived as any other terminal of the network.

Alexander's existence as Brandon McFarland is not the privileged or true identity of Alexander simply because it was bestowed upon her by her parents. Brandon McFarland is merely one identity of many that Alexander can choose to act out or not.

I don't want to carry this  
shit around either.

--Palahniuk, *Invisible  
Monsters* 214

#### The Ahistorical / Indefinable Nature of the Terminal State

In *Invisible Monsters*, history is a sore spot, a veritable smorgasbord of bad memories that the characters try desperately to separate themselves from. Though Kelley has a few breakdowns in *Invisible Monsters*, his angst over the childhood mementos his mother returns to him is the only scene in the novel where he is bluntly honest about how angry he is with his own life. While the characters constantly try to push their history and their past into the forgotten, they are simultaneously terrified of being forgotten themselves. Kelley is a closet homosexual who worked as a police detective and later an undercover



officer in the gay prostitution scene before being fired for being too old to attract young homosexual men. He cannot face his own homosexuality or his age but releases all his frustrations when he destroys the articles his mother returns to him. Palahniuk writes:

A lock of blonde hair inside a locket on a chain, the chain swinging and let go bola-style from Manus's hand, disappears into the dark. "She said she was giving me this stuff because she just didn't have room for it," Manus says. "It's not that she didn't want it." The plaster print of the second grade hand goes end over end, off into the darkness. "Well, Mom, if it isn't good enough for you." Manus says, "I don't want to carry this shit around either." (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 213-4)

Kelley feels a sense of rejection with the rejection of his childhood mementos. Everything he made in elementary school, every sentimental item is practically erased, thrown out into a dark world that does not know him or his memories. He becomes almost anonymous where not even his mother keeps his memory. Even for the long road trip across the United States, no one misses Kelley or takes

note of his absence. McFarland kidnaps him at gunpoint to come with her and Alexander on this wild trip and not one person realizes he's gone. Kelley's own sense of doom comes not only from becoming a disappointment but also from becoming so insignificant that he is forgotten.

The question of history is not only evident in *Invisible Monsters*; it also appears as a dilemma for theorists interested in media studies. Nick Stevenson, in grappling with McLuhan's ideas of humanity's convergence with electronic media, says, "The world of sound bites, instantaneous news, fluctuating fashions and three-minute pop videos has eradicated our sense of history. The restless and shifting nature of media discourse can only occupy matters of serious importance for a couple of seconds at a time before moving on [...]. The subject is no longer capable of constructing a stable version of the past" (Stevenson 148). Using Stevenson's interpretation of McLuhan, without a stable idea of their pasts the characters of *Invisible Monsters* are one step closer to abstraction or even, as Baudrillard might speculate, to the life of the clone. Palahniuk's characters are all trying to dissociate themselves from their past only to be obsessed by the idea of a contented past life, of the

possibility of being happy with the family that shuns them or is indifferent to their existence. Baudrillard speaks of this obsession with history in the postmodern world that has no history, saying: "Today, the history that is 'given back' to us (precisely because it was taken from us) has no more of a relation to a 'historical real' than neofiguration is an invocation of resemblance, but at the same time the flagrant proof of the disappearance of objects in their very representation: hyperreal" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra & Simulation* 45). If that is the case, Alexander, McFarland, Kelley, and Cotrell serve as proof or evidence of their own disappearance. They have dissolved into personae rather than characters, effects rather than true human emotion, and terminals of a system instead of special, unique, and individual identities that have roots or a history that defines them.

Being forgotten seems to be the aim of electronic media as well as the self-destructive aim of the characters of *Invisible Monsters* who purposely tear themselves from their roots. Frederic Jameson, in an essay that poses that the postmodern subject refuses to connect to the present or actively consider an idea of history, argues:

I believe that the emergence of postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of this new moment of late, consumer or multinational capitalism. I believe also that its formal features in many ways express the deeper logic of that particular social system. I will only be able, however, to show this for one major theme: namely the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little, begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier formations have had in one way or another to preserve. Think only of the media exhaustion of news: of how Nixon and, even more so, Kennedy are figures from a now distant past. One is tempted to say that the very function of the news media is to relegate such recent historical experiences as rapidly as possible into the past. The informational function of the media would thus be to help us forget, to serve

as the very agents and mechanisms for our  
historical amnesia. (Jameson 143-4)

Drawing on Jameson's observation, it seems as though the postmodern life lived under market capitalism is similar to the pile of wood chips that result from a tree tied up with symbolic meaning, with memories of first loves and children climbing through its branches, being chopped and sent through a mulcher. Whatever the tree may have meant, if it ever meant anything, is irrelevant after it is mulch. As Jameson points out, whatever Kennedy really stood for in the 1960's is relegated to a distant past, almost a myth. Similarly, in *Invisible Monsters*, Kelley pushes his own symbolic meaning out into the dark night, forgetting his own past to keep on marching through the present. Jameson also takes the popularity of nostalgia films, films that are remade or period films, in the United States as evidence that the greater American public has trouble expressing their own present experiences and constantly looks to the past as a kind of crutch to get them through the present (Jameson 134-5). The past, and some idea of tradition, appears as the humanistic crutch to a public trying to cope with a postmodernity that eradicates history.

For such theorists as Gerard Raulet<sup>11</sup> and Takis Fotopoulos<sup>12</sup> the process of creating and constantly renegotiating reality is delegated to that coping public, the masses. Raulet asserts that a society, when determining what is normal, and should be conformed to, especially in advertising, does not factor in such things as facts and morality (Raulet 3). Even Fotopoulos, who is looking more at mass media's influences in market capitalism, views people as not purely individuals but more importantly as dependent beings who are subject to society. He says, "As long as individuals live in a society, they are not just individuals but *social* individuals, subjects to a process, which socializes them and induces them to internalize the existing institutional framework as well as the dominant social paradigm. In this sense, people are not completely free to create their world but are conditioned by history, tradition and culture" (Fotopoulos 35).

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<sup>11</sup> See footnote number 8

<sup>12</sup> Fotopoulos's essay, "Mass Media, Culture, and Democracy", aims specifically to describe how mass media is manipulated and used by the elite and socio-economically privileged to forward their own agendas and the homogenizing effects of passively consuming this interested interpretation of existence.

Fotopoulos might attribute Alexander's drive to look for her sister and find a link to the past via that sister to her existence as a social individual, who is, a subject of her society. Alexander is not a free standing individual; instead her surroundings and other human terminals mold her identity. As much as the characters of *Invisible Monsters* want to be separated from one another and function individually, their own relationships with each other pull them together. Kelley molests Alexander, Alexander is going through a male to female sex change as did Cotrell, and Cotrell and McFarland are best friends and have Kelley as a common lover. They have shared relationships that contribute to their own lived experiences and their own realities. Their interconnectedness becomes the problem in generating any meaning. The line between where one character ends and the other begins becomes harder to discern. Both Kelley and McFarland are described as having faces that looked to be covered in cherry pie in addition to the fact that both characters have self-inflicted facial deformities.

While the characters do keep their physical bodies and feel estranged when on television as projected images, it is in the commonalities of their collapsed identities and

appearances that their individuality is demolished.

Bukatman also discusses the body as a changing concept in his notion of terminal identity. He writes: "The body is often a site of deformation of disappearance - the subject is dissolved, simulated, retooled, genetically engineered, evolved, and de-evolved" (Bukatman 20). Perhaps a part of the reason why Palahniuk's characters are so engrossed in altering their physical body is that they cease to exist without a tangible body, a body that burdens terminal identity. Terminal identity supports the idea that a human can exist without the physical body in such ways as being displayed as an image on a television screen. Even in looking at cyborg characters in science fiction, Bukatman notes that there is "an uneasy but consistent sense of human obsolescence, and at stake is the very definition of the human" (Bukatman 20). While Palahniuk's characters have not yet collapsed together with the machine or the animal into a cyborg, they do begin to become indistinguishable from one another. Jean Baudrillard describes this melting of differences and the results of breaking down binary relationships that have defined Western thinking for thousands of years. He writes:



Any system invents for itself a principle of equilibrium, exchange and value, causality and purpose, which plays on fixed oppositions: good and evil, true and false, sign and referent, subject and object. This is the whole space of difference and regulation which, as long as it functions, ensures the stability and dialectical movement of the whole. Up to this point, all is well. It is when this bipolar relationship breaks down, when the system short-circuits itself, that it generates its own critical mass, and veers off exponentially. When there is no longer any internal reference system within which exchange can take place (between production and social wealth, for example, or between news coverage and real events), you get into an exponential phase, a phase of speculative disorder. (Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange* 5-6)

For Baudrillard, chaos is the result of the lack of definable phenomena that are recognized as separate and different from other phenomena. The inability of Palahniuk's characters to have a definitive idea of self and foster healthy relationships throws their lives into a

chaotic state where the characters travel the country and recreate a façade of an identity wherever they go.

Edward Schiappa<sup>13</sup> also looks at the need for difference in defining the world saying, "Key to the practice of classification is the ability to identify certain sensations as 'the same' and others as 'different.'

[William] James describes our perceptual experience as a constant flux: what makes the flux manageable is our ability to segment or compartmentalize specific sensations into categories" (Schiappa 15). Characters like Cotrell and Alexander escape binary categories such as male and female by being both simultaneously. The characters' inability to be categorized results in being indefinable. If, as Baudrillard claims, these categories do not exist, then the real and the simulated are one in the same because there is no defined difference between the two. What results is a state in which definition becomes an impossible illusion and all perceptions and identities are malleable.

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<sup>13</sup> In *Defining Reality*, Edward Schiappa looks specifically at how definitions are created by a society or certain people or institutions of power to forward particular interests rather than viewing definitions as sorting reality.

Addison Wesley turned into  
Nash Rambler, and we rented  
another Cadillac.

--Palahniuk, *Invisible  
Monsters* 238

Neo-Agency in the Act of Play: Manipulating  
the Terminal Network

With nothing but chaos left, the characters of *Invisible Monsters* are let loose to play with an existence that has detached itself from the past, from the idea of morality, and from symbolic meaning. They exist in the terminal state as players, subjects capable of manipulating the terminal network. The role of player or manipulator is nothing new. Bukatman calls upon Michel de Certeau's analysis of the human subject within highly advanced technological and communication systems, calling this role the role of the "trickster". Bukatman quotes de Certeau who says: "'Increasingly constrained, yet less and less concerned with these vast frameworks, the individual detaches himself from them, to pull tricks on them, to rediscover, within an electronicized and computerized megalopolis, the 'art' of the hunters and rural folk of earlier days'" (Bukatman 213). Within this new terminal

environment, a new subjectivity needs to be negotiated to bridge the expanding gap between a purely terminal existence and an unavailable privileged ideal of a self-aware individual. Brandy Alexander is the most at ease with her position as player, as a person who can create realities and define her experiences as she chooses within the terminal network. When McFarland and Alexander first meet, Alexander creates an identity for McFarland, ignoring what McFarland might view as her own identity, a model who shot her jaw off. McFarland recounts the meeting, saying, "Brandy, when she sat me in the chair still hot from her ass and she locked the speech therapist door that first time, she named me out of my future. She named me Daisy St. Patience and never wanted to know the rightful name I walked in the door with. I was the rightful heir to the international fashion house, the house of St. Patience" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 173). In this instance, Alexander is not interested in McFarland's past or her own, preferring to give McFarland a different name and a different past, one that points towards the future, not weighted down by the past and its memories.

Though the chaos sounds daunting, the freedom implied is unlimited. Douglas Kellner argues that with the

insignificance of symbolic meaning that results from the lack of difference, from the overflow of information that erases a sense of content or meaning (Kellner 3), human subjects find their own agency in the act of play. He has a negative view of mass media, which he believes forces humans into becoming objects of communication systems (5). Even in this subjugated state of being a terminal in a larger system, Baudrillard sees the chaos and resulting play in a world without meaning and difference as the ultimate freedom instead of the debilitating confinement that Kellner sees in being a terminal of the network system. Baudrillard says:

We should instead rejoice in this totalization of the world which, by purging everything of its functions and technical goals, makes room for the singularity of thought, the singularity of the event, the singularity of language, the singularity of the object and the image. In the end, it is the very existence of single-track thinking [*la pensée unique*], of the totalitarian system of the economy, of information and artificial intelligence - and the automation and exponential development of these things - which

leaves space for a world that is *literally true*. It is the final accomplishment of reality which leaves room for the radical illusion. Now, it is in this literal truth, this play of the world, that the ultimate freedom lies. (Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange* 121)

In Baudrillard's view, freedom is not being tied to and continually defined by the past but being able to alter the all-encompassing illusion that is the simulacrum.

Alexander craves this ahistorical freedom and pushes McFarland towards this type of freedom.

Alexander is constantly coaching McFarland on how to live a life that goes beyond tradition and refuses to believe in the simplicity of such binary relationships as what is true or false. For Alexander, the fun in life and the point of life, are the play, the seduction of rootlessness and indirection. Alexander says to McFarland when advising her to wear a veil over her face:

"The most boring thing in the entire world."

Brandy says, "is nudity. The second most boring thing, she says, is honesty. "Think of this as a tease. It's lingerie for your face," she says.

"A peekaboo nightgown you wear over your whole

identity." The third most boring thing in the world is your sorry-assed past. So Brandy never asked me anything. Bulldozer alpha bitch she can be, we meet again and again in the speech therapist office and Brandy tells me everything I need to know about myself. (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 112)

Alexander does not want McFarland walking around scaring people with her grotesque face, but insists that McFarland play with her own identity and how she will be viewed by other people. John Harms and David Dickens<sup>14</sup>, in their exploration of subjectivity in mass mediated society, write, "The postmodern view of decentered selves saturated by mass-media communications is radically opposed to modern expressivist and humanist views of subjectivity, stressing that selves are constituted by various 'language games' instead of using language to express and communicate as autonomous subjects" (218). If humans are terminals of

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<sup>14</sup> In their essay, "Postmodern Media Studies: Analysis or Symptom", John Harms and David Dickens look at media studies as a field and the claims of its major theorists, drawing the conclusion that the field itself perpetuates the conditions it critiques by neglecting to look beyond the glossy surface of mass mediated societies to examine the historical, political, and economic context that mass media function in.

larger networks, they are, as Harms and Dickens point out, "constituted in acts and structures of communication" within that system which decenters them (Harms & Dickens 218). McFarland becomes a good example of Harms's and Dickens's argument as she does not have to feel obligated to express her deepest inner feelings that supposedly compose her own being. Any version of her life, whether accurate to her experiences or not, is valid since, in the postmodern environment that Harms and Dickens describe "audiences respond, not to the meaning of the message or its connection to an external referent, but to its fascinating immanent code and self-referential structure" (Harms & Dickens 217). Such a highly mediated state where subjects are free to constantly alter their realities exists in *Invisible Monsters* as well as in the American culture that Neal Gabler depicts in *Life: The Movie*. It seems as though, both in *Invisible Monsters* and in the American society it depicts, the days when realism was the cornerstone of sanity have passed and in its place is the hyperreal, the simulacrum that characters such as McFarland, Alexander, Kelley, and Cotrell inhabit and create simultaneously. Neal Gabler<sup>15</sup> notes of a pragmatic

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<sup>15</sup> See footnote number 3



American culture: "Realism was even regarded as the foundation of mental health. The healthy individual was one who saw things clearly and accurately, the unhealthy individual one who distorted reality" (Gabler 239).

Palahniuk's characters are constantly distorting and manipulating their realities in the terminal state of Postmodern human subjectivity by playing the role of the trickster. It seems that tricking others is a necessary skill and the subject's singular sense of freedom in a confining network.

The characters' existence in simulacra and the terminal state is played with in scenes such as the one in which McFarland and Cotrell go to furniture sales floors in major department stores to study for their modeling classes. They act like they live in these mock living rooms and dining rooms since there is no difference between the fake room, the spectacle, and a room that would actually be in one of their homes, the supposed reality that the spectacle represents.

But at Brumbach's, Evie and me, we'd cat nap in any of the dozen perfect bedrooms. We'd stuff cotton between our toes and paint our nails in chintz-covered club chairs. Then we'd study our

Taylor Robberts modeling textbook on a long polished dining table. "Here's the same as those fakey reproductions of natural habitats they build at zoos," Evie would say. "You know, those concrete polar ice caps and those rainforests made of welded pipe trees holding sprinklers." Every afternoon, Evie and me, we'd star in our own personal unnatural habitat. The clerks would sneak off to find sex in the men's room. We'd all soak up attention in our own little matinée life. (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 70)

McFarland and Cotrell see the model rooms as posed environments similar to a zoo, but they continue their normal activities in these simulated rooms all the same, sleeping, painting nails, and studying. Baudrillard would say of this phenomenon: "There is no equivalent of the world [....] Any mirror whatsoever would still be part of the world. There is not enough room both for the world and for its double. So there can be no verification of the world. This is, indeed, why 'reality' is an imposture. Being without possible verification, the world is a fundamental illusion" (*Impossible Exchange* 3). In this scene in the model rooms, McFarland and do not act

differently than their lives outside the posed rooms. Their existence as part of the furniture exhibits is hyperreal because it is just as valid as their lives at home, on the road, or at work. There is no real to compare the simulations to and hence no verification of which phenomena Palahniuk's characters exist in. As Baudrillard poses, everything is illusion because there can be no proof to the contrary. McFarland and Cotrell's experiences in the furniture displays are completely spectacular, all encompassing, and fully integrated into their daily lives. The characters feed the spectacle and feed upon it in an addictive and closed circuit. Bukatman argues: "Ultimately the spectacle takes on the totalizing function of any addictive substance, it differs from dope only in that its addictive properties remain hidden within the rational economic structures of the capitalist society" (Bukatman 36). This addiction is not posed as a disease but merely the consequences of terminal identity. Being a terminal is equated to being completely consumed by the surrounding spectacle that qualifies the terminal subject's existence.

A furniture sales floor, a zoo, or Disneyland serve as distractions or as spectacles to set against "real" life, the daily life people lead at home and at work. Nick

Stevenson argues that being engrossed in the images perpetuated by the media, humankind misses the power relations and the political implications that drive the mass media. He states: "The problem is that the spectacle gives human misery and suffering the appearance of unreality. The spectacle is ideological because the masses are separated from the means of image production and forced into a form of stupefied passivity. They live in enforced distraction, which conceals the power relations that determine existing social relations" (Stevenson 147-8). For Stevenson, the key social, political, and economical issues that go into erecting the public's opinion are hidden in electronic media. For instance, McFarland and Cotrell take the model rooms to be average rooms that they can use to work in and live in for a few hours a day. They are engrossed in the spectacle of the posed room instead of the politics behind the construction of that room. Everything in the department store is placed strategically in order to get the maximum amount of sales and only the more expensive items are put on display while cheaper ones are shelved discretely elsewhere. Hyperreality entirely depends on commerce. The model rooms are nicely decorated and clean. Disneyland is built to look like a fantasy

land. Hyperreality requires or calls for commercial exchange. Along a similar trajectory as Stevenson, though of a stronger Marxist persuasion, Theodor Adorno<sup>16</sup> points out: "The commercial character of culture causes the difference between culture and practical life to disappear. Aesthetic semblance turns into the sheen which commercial advertising lends to the commodities which absorbs it in truth" (61). With the goal of making money, aesthetics of the product or its marketing overpower the product's practical use. In this case, appearance becomes the top priority of companies and consumers. The model rooms in *Invisible Monsters* are taken as real by the characters even as the characters make no differentiation between the model rooms and their own homes. For Palahniuk's characters, there is nothing outside the spectacle much to the dismay of theorists like Stevenson and Adorno who stress the need to examine the politics that create the spectacle.

The characters of *Invisible Monsters* extend their ability to play with reality to their very identity.

Alexander actually renames McFarland and Kelley several

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<sup>16</sup> In *The Culture Industry*, a collection of essays, Adorno's main argument lies in examining the homogenizing powers of the postmodern world overpowered by both mass media and capitalism that pushes for endless reproduction and the integration of consumers into a prescribed social norm.

times throughout their road trip. McFarland and Kelley accept these name changes and even role play their parts. Their identities are fluid and innumerable and hence to a degree unimportant. Of their trip across the Western United States, Palahniuk writes:

After San Francisco and San Jose and Sacramento, we went to Reno and Brandy turned Denver Omelet into Chase Manhattan [....] Jump to Las Vegas and Brandy turns Chase Manhattan into Eberhard Faber. [....] After Las Vegas, we rented one of those family vans. Eberhard Faber became Hewlett Packard. [...] After Utah, Brandy turned Hewlett Packard into Harper Collins in Butte. [....] She got so ripped, she turned Harper Collins into Addison Wesley. [....] Addison Wesley turned into Nash Rambler, and we rented another Cadillac.

(Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 233-8)

Manus Kelley is renamed every time the group travels to another city or changes rental cars. A name becomes no more important than the car they drive or the clothes they wear as names and identities are continually reproduced. The names Alexander chooses for Kelley are of interest in themselves as they imply products that are mass produced.

The Denver Omelet is a breakfast item available at almost any diner chain like Denny's or IHOP. Chase Manhattan is a bank with branches across the United States. Eberhard Faber is a huge manufacturer of office supplies such as pencils and erasers just as Hewlett Packard is an enormous company which produces computers, copy machines, printers, and fax machines. Alexander also names Kelley after two publishing companies, HarperCollins and Addison Wesley, which largely print educational materials and textbooks, and finally, a mass produced 1950's automobile, the Nash Rambler, that, in its time, was considered the car of the future. Manus Kelley is not an individual but a terminal of the system, a mass produced product of a cultural machine. Kelley is as original as a Faber eraser, or an Addison Wesley third grade reader. In constantly renaming Kelley, Alexander is playing with roles or subject positions that are arbitrary. She re-sorts identities by renaming other characters and giving them a different past or linking them to mass produced products and enormous companies. Just as she makes McFarland into Daisy St. Patience the fashion heiress<sup>17</sup>, Alexander makes Kelley into

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<sup>17</sup> Brandy Alexander names Shannon McFarland after a fictional fashion house instead of asking her what her name

an Italian advisor to a princess<sup>18</sup>, or into her mentally retarded brother on another occasion.

What all of the characters of *Invisible Monsters* struggle with is the idea of creating their own reality and that they have a level of autonomy within a simulacrum to create their realities through tricks and manipulations of their realities. Edward Schiappa holds strong to his premise that "the question of who should have the authority to make definitional decisions amounts literally to who has the power to delineate what counts as reality" (78).

Though Schiappa looks at this on a social level, Palahniuk's characters act them out on an individual level. The characters clearly recognize that they can change their identity and how they are perceived, and thus, that they can change their reality. McFarland shoots her jaw off knowing that it will change the way people view her.

Cotrell and Alexander opt for sex changes, fully aware of

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is or what her occupation is when they first meet in a speech therapist's office at the hospital where McFarland is recovering from shooting herself in the jaw.

<sup>18</sup> Brandy Alexander creates this role for Manus Kelley while visiting an open house in the Pacific Northwest. Alexander herself is the princess that Kelley supposedly works for in order to give the real estate agent the impression that the trio is wealthy and in the market to purchase the mansion rather than just being there to pilfer drugs and cosmetics.



how their acts will alter their realities. Their problems lie in living out what they create and understanding that their created reality is real, that the spectacle, the simulacrum, is all that is left. Cotrell as female is as real as Cotrell as male. This call to simply exist within one's reality, to merely appear is what Baudrillard sees as what remains of identity. This attempt to merely exert one's existence engrosses Palahniuk's characters to such a degree that they often discount what Bukatman sees as the potential of their role as trickster. Baudrillard states in an interview:

Therefore everyone is henceforth called upon to appear, just appear, without worrying too much about being. Hence the importance of the look ... [...] whereas the 'look' is simply this 'I exist, I am here, I am an image, look at me, look, look! [...]' it is exhibition without inhibition, a kind of ingenious publicity in which each person becomes the impresario of his own appearance, of his own artifice. There is here a new passion, ironic and new, that of beings devoid of all illusion about their own subjectivity. I would say almost without

illusion about their own desires, all the more fascinated by their own metamorphosis. (Gane 41)

Baudrillard sees the human subject as not having a complex and unique identity, but an obsession with merely exerting one's existence despite the lack of such a humanistic identity. Taking on this perspective, part of the characters' existence as terminals is being able to forget the past. Alexander finally lets go of the fact that she was born a boy and is on her way to completing her sex change surgeries. McFarland also lets go of her past as a beautiful model and is ready to exclude herself from society. Alexander and McFarland are more interested in their changes, their metamorphoses, than they are in what they really wanted or the societal issues that they are subject to. Alexander admits that she does not want to be a woman and McFarland misses being adored as a model but, at the end of the novel, both are more engrossed in how they've changed than anything else. Alexander is being doted upon by the Rhea sisters before her final surgery and McFarland is amazed that she not only is ugly, but is kind enough to the brother she hates, to give her all her identifying papers so Alexander can have McFarland's life as a model. Having moved beyond reality and history,

Palahniuk's characters may not be confident but are ready to exercise their abilities to play with their existence and identities. Their possible role as trickster lends them a sense of agency as well as a degree of resistance to the homogeneity that results from passively existing in the terminal network.

[T]he folks are staring at  
themselves in the monitor  
staring at themselves in the  
monitor staring at themselves  
in the monitor, on and on.

--Palahniuk, *Invisible  
Monsters* 118

#### The Human Subject and the Monitor as a Reality Loop

With this new sense of play that is characteristic of the terminal state, there is an obsession with the self and the vacancy of surface appearances without a history or symbolic meaning that envelopes not only the major characters of *Invisible Monsters* but also participants of live television shows in the novel. Jean Baudrillard contends that the interaction between a human and a machine

is questionable. In an interview with Roger Célestin, Baudrillard says of interactive media:

I'm not sure that, in this game between man and machine, there is a real exchange [...] where there is actually a kind of face to face dialogue, where there is a response, a challenge, a veritable game with rules. It's a system of communication that is in fact very circular, and in this circularity - which is possibly almost tautological - interaction only gives the illusion that there is an actual exchange [ . . . ]

(Célestin 11-2)

Rather than a true exchange such as a question for its answer, Baudrillard sees electronic communication as circular, exchanging itself for nothing. The terminal network functions this way as it lacks a beginning, end, or center. The characters' state as terminals within this network does not allow for genuine communication or interaction but reduces them to mere functions of input/output where the system acts upon the terminals. While Alexander and Kelley are selling prescription drugs on the streets of Seattle, McFarland stays in her hotel

room and watches a late night talk show. McFarland narrates:

On television are three or four people in chairs sitting on a low stage in front of a television audience. This is on television like an infomercial, but as the camera zooms in on each person for a close-up, a little caption appears across the person's chest [....] Gwen shapes her story with her hands as she talks. She leans forward out of her chair. Her eyes are watching something up and to the right, just off the camera. I know it's the monitor. Gwen's watching herself tell her story. (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 116-7)

In this scene, the assumption is that the speaker on television will share some information with the larger public. Gwen, a minor character who appears in one scene of the novel, is the talk show guest that McFarland watches on television. Gwen is not on television to share her life story with an audience but to share it with herself. She relates to herself and looks to the projected image of herself alone for comfort, ignoring that there are other people watching her and listening to her. This is what

Gerard Raulet calls the obscene, that which is over represented and overexposed instead of some repressed secret, as obscenity has previously been viewed. He writes, "In the beginning there was the secret. Then there was the repressed, and that was the rule of a game of depth. Finally, there was the obscene, and that was the rule of the game of a universe without appearances and without depth -- of a universe of transparency. Blank obscenity" (Raulet 5). In this sense of obscenity there is no such thing as a secret or a taboo, perhaps even of shame or modesty. This mentality appears clearly in the character of Gwen. She exposes herself to millions of people only to watch herself, to listen to herself tell her own story. She does not need an audience if all she is focused on is herself. Her explicit story of prostitution and incest may even be her ploy to get attention from other people. Neal Gabler takes note of the tendencies of electronic media to report sensational stories and whose first aim is to entertain rather than inform. Of the mass media, Gabler writes, "[T]he media were not really reporting what people did; they were reporting what people did to get media attention. In other words, as life was increasingly being lived for the media, so the media were

increasingly covering themselves and their impact on life" (Gabler 97). Gabler describes a state similar to what Baudrillard described as the impossibility of exchange or communication between humans and machines. For Gabler, the medium is what determines the content, creating a circular system. Here we see the larger network, mass media, working upon the terminals, the general public, pushing them to act a certain way and determining what behavior merits media attention. Bukatman goes so far as to say, in his analysis of the effects of television on the human subject, that television replaces "pseudo-realities for the 'real thing'" and even infects the human subject like a virus would (Bukatman 32). He states: "In both cases the viewer becomes little more than an adjunct or extension of the media" which seems to make the human subject's quest for agency in a terminal existence that much harder to locate or justify (Bukatman 32).

Gwen is involved in a very circular path where she is telling her story and listening and watching herself tell her story back to herself through the monitor. She elects to relate only to herself rather than to the host of the show or the live audience, much less those watching at home. The same phenomenon is prevalent among American

moviegoers which Gabler marks as evidence that audiences are seeing less and less of a divide between themselves and the films they watch. Viewers identify with themselves rather than the characters of the films, creating and projecting their own ideal lives onto the films they watch.

In lifie terms<sup>19</sup>, what [psychologist Shelley E.] Taylor was saying was that the movies we created for ourselves, including a bit of self-puffery, gave us the same sort of pleasure that conventional movies did, only here it wasn't through some vicarious identification with the heroes, it was through a vicarious identification with ourselves [that we derived pleasure from films]. It suggested that the mind had begun processing life the way it processed the movies and consequently that if the movies were a metaphor for the condition of modern existence, the moviegoer was a metaphor for how one could cope with that existence. (Gabler 239-40)

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<sup>19</sup> By using the term "lifie" Gabler means to describe films that translate an idea of daily life in film itself, which blurs the line between where the movie starts and the viewer's life begins as these types of films or media coverage (such as the death of Princess Diana) dominate airtime and conversation for an extended length of time.



For Gabler, imagining themselves in a film, human subjects find a way to cope with their lives outside of the film. It seems like a false interaction since Gwen is not speaking to her audience or the host but a camera, to a monitor and her image which appears on it. Gwen's appearance on television to share her sensational story is relegated to the state of illusion. She does not exchange her story for the audience's sympathy or disgust, though that may be the apparent aim of the entire transaction. Just as Gwen does not see anyone else but herself, Baudrillard takes note of a similar occurrence of indifference towards others in his book *America*, which looks specifically at Americans and their lifestyle. He writes, "No longer wishing others to see them, Americans end up not seeing one another. So people pass in the street without looking at one another; which may seem a mark of discretion and civility, but which is also a sign of indifference [....] The American way of life is spontaneously fictional, since it is a transcending of the imaginary in reality" (Baudrillard, *America* 95). Gwen and perhaps the larger American public end up disappearing into themselves and becoming mere marks of existence as they no longer look for meaningful interaction with others.

The spectacle itself perpetuates this state of isolation that the human subject experiences, which Sadie Plant, a scholar of Situationist thought<sup>20</sup>, calls this "sense in which alienated individuals are condemned to lives spent effectively watching themselves" (Plant 10). Gwen, Cotrell, and their audiences experience this existence by being mesmerized by their own images in the monitor. Gwen stares into the monitor looking to feel her own existence, but as Sadie Plant points out, the more spectators contemplate their existence in images, the less they understand their existence as roles. Spectators are more concerned with appearances than the political aspects of their existence. Situationist, Guy Debord states: "The spectator's alienation from and submission to the contemplated object (which is the outcome of his unthinking activity) works like this: the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires" (Debord 23). Debord argues, as spectators get further and

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<sup>20</sup> The Situationists argued that society had become inebriated by the spectacle of media such as film, which leads to widespread bourgeois conformism. The Situationists believed that a proletariat revolution could shake the hold that the spectacle had over the masses.

further from symbolic meaning and understanding existence, the more they prefer the spectacle to meaning. Sadie Plant examines this phenomenon as well: "'They are given meaning: they want spectacle,' he [Baudrillard] declares. In effect, they prefer pushpin to poetry or, in Baudrillard's terms, football to politics. The drama of the political cannot compete with the spectacle of football [....] The masses are neither manipulated nor involved; their relation to the media is the entirely passive role of the object" (Plant 155-6). If, as the Situationists pose, the spectacle is overpowering and objectifying, Gwen's and Cotrell's attempts to find completion or existence via the monitor is to no avail as they lack an agency or ability to initiate a meaningful exchange or comprehend their existence as predetermined roles.<sup>21</sup> Is fully realizing Bukatman's version of terminal identity, in all its fulfilling and positive possibilities, even possible for Palahniuk's characters who cannot penetrate the screen?

Unlike Gwen who is not looking for external sympathy or emotion, Cotrell is begging for the acceptance of others

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<sup>21</sup> Situationist thought poses that human existence is relegated to roles that the spectacle upholds. These roles eliminate a sense of individuality and uniqueness as any number of people function within identical or similar roles. This topic is taken up in depth in chapter three.

through the television screen while filming her infomercials. McFarland describes the scene and Cotrell's own despair, saying,

Evie is everywhere after midnight, offering what she's got on a silver tray. The studio audience ignores her, watching themselves on the monitor, trapped in the reality loop of watching themselves watch themselves, trying the way we do every time we look in a mirror to figure out exactly who that person is. That loop that never ends. Evie and me did this infomercial. How could I be so dumb? We're so totally trapped in ourselves. The camera stays on Evie, and what I can almost hear Evie saying is, love me. Love me, love me, love me, love me, love me, love me, love me, I'll be anybody you want me to be. Use me. Change me. I can be thin with big breasts and big hair. Take me apart. Make me into anything, but just love me. (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 265-6)

Cotrell is depending on the audience and the medium that presents her to them to give her a sense of completion or satisfaction in life, a reality that she can cope with.

She is not asking for a compromise between her lived experience and the mass media but is rather turning to the mass media and the hoards of people behind them for a prepared role. Fotopoulos sees an almost balanced relationship between reality and the media, in that the two interact with one another to create each other (47) but Cotrell's despair testifies to an imbalance or a rift between the two. More accurate to Cotrell's feelings while filming the infomercial is Richard Lane's analysis of Baudrillard's view of mass media, which he sees as offering an empty reality to audiences. Lane outlines Baudrillard's argument, which states that "the media doesn't present us with reality, '... but *the dizzying whirl of reality...*'. The media appears to give us abundance when it is actually 'empty' of all real content; it is the site of the playing out of our desires, protecting us at the same time from confronting the everyday realities of a dangerous and problematic world: 'So we live, sheltered by signs, in the denial of the real'" (Lane 71-2). Cotrell is relying on the medium to do the work of creating a reality and identity for her instead of depending on human interaction and a sense of self that does not exist for the human subject. She allows and depends on the terminal to

penetrate her existence and feed her an identity. She does not penetrate the terminal or the screen, relegating herself to the docile receiver. Baudrillard, however, implies a level of comfort with the lack of content and the ability to play with reality that Cotrell does not achieve. Cotrell is desperate for something solid that does not exist in the Postmodern world she passively exists in. Her passivity in her interface with the screen holds her back from Bukatman's idea of terminal identity, an identity that embraces and finds agency in existing on the screen.

As Cotrell stares into the camera, begging anyone who is watching to accept her, to love her, the audience is staring at themselves in the monitor. Cotrell offers herself up to the audience to mold her into whatever they want, but like Cotrell, who is obsessed with herself being filmed, the audience is only fixated on themselves staring back at themselves. All anyone sees in these scenes is themselves. They are all self-referential: Cotrell, Gwen, and the infomercial audience are caught either being on the screen or watching the screen. Confined to their reality loops, these characters become surfaces, screens, and terminals that are both calculated and docile. Gwen and Cotrell are made-up to look as they should. When Gwen

appears on screen the caption defines her with four words: "Gwen Works As Hooker" (Palahniuk 117). Gwen knows she is on television to tell her story while Cotrell is paid to circulate around the audience giving out samples of the product she is selling. Cotrell and Gwen are nothing more than a commodity within what Palahniuk calls a "reality loop".

Chuck Palahniuk recognizes the inescapability of this reality loop and clearly points to its power over the masses when he writes of the infomercial audience, Cotrell's audience:

The girl offers a golden anniversary couple in matching Hawaiian shirts a selection of canapés from a silver tray, but the couple and everybody else in their double knits and camera necklaces, they're staring up and to the right at something off camera. You know it's the monitor. It's eerie, but what's happening is the folks are staring at themselves in the monitor staring at themselves in the monitor staring at themselves in the monitor, on and on, completely trapped in a reality loop that never ends. (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 118)

The audience cannot stop looking at themselves. They cannot exist outside of the reality loop, the spectacle, or they will know that there is nothing beyond that. There is no beginning or end, no handy binary relationships to ease the sorting of reality. Baudrillard also comments on these closed circuits, these reality loops one cannot escape:

Immense energies are deployed to hold this simulacrum at bay, to avoid the brutal desimulation that would confront us in the face of the obvious reality of a radical loss of meaning [... Communication] is a circular process - that of simulation, that of the hyperreal. The hyperreality of communication and of meaning. More real than the real, that is how the real is abolished. Thus not only communication but the social functions in a closed circuit, as a lure - to which the force of *myth* is attached. Belief, faith in information attach themselves to this tautological proof that the system gives of itself by doubling the signs of an unlocatable reality. (Baudrillard, *Simulacra & Simulation* 80-1)



From Baudrillard's perspective, Gwen, Cotrell, and their audiences exist in a closed circuit. They cannot connect with what happens outside of this confining reality loop or to anyone not in that loop at the moment because as Baudrillard argues, humans and machines do not participate in meaningful exchange. Their lives are consumed by these reality loops as terminals are constantly passed through and forgotten. As Cotrell, Gwen, and their audiences only stare at their own projected image, they become what Bukatman calls the image addict. Bukatman states:

The image addict is a helpless prisoner of the spectacular society. The spectacle is a force of pacification, exploitation, control, and containment which functions as either a supplement of simulacrum of the state. The citizen becomes a blip circulating within the feedback loop of imploded society: terminal identity begins [. . . .] In the end, image addiction is no longer posited as a disease: it has instead become the very condition of existence in postmodern culture. (Bukatman 69)

Image addiction is so embedded in Palahniuk's characters that even when McFarland critiques Cotrell's stupidity for

turning to television for acceptance, McFarland is alone in a hotel room watching television rather than interacting with Kelley or Alexander whom she is traveling with. All of Palahniuk's characters are fully aware of their addiction to images and surface appearances, but not all of them are sure or confident in their role as trickster. While Alexander is aware of and exploits her ability to trick others and the terminal network itself, characters like Kelley are not consciously aware of this agency and fall victim to being manipulated, for instance by Alexander, rather than actively manipulating their own appearance and existence.

Palahniuk's characters exist as terminals in a closed circuit where differentiation and meaning cannot exist, where their only option is to live out what Baudrillard calls the "circularity of all media effects" (Baudrillard *Simulacra & Simulation* 83). Cotrell and Gwen desperately throw themselves at mass media, hoping to find fulfillment because they do not seem to have anywhere else to turn. What any of these characters do or say does not change their state as terminals since they are inseparable from the media that define them and the network they are situated in. Of the inability of escaping the spectacle

that has turned into the hyperreal, Baudrillard writes. "It is useless to dream of revolution through content, useless to dream of a revolution through form, because the medium and the real are now in a single nebula whose truth is indecipherable" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra & Simulation* 82-3). The proletariat revolution that the situationists posed as the remedy to the society of the spectacle, is pushed aside as ineffective by Baudrillard, whose idea of the simulacrum poses the spectacle as all that remains. The characters of *Invisible Monsters* have given up their pasts and their human relationships to float as self-referential terminals; screens that reflect only media produced images of themselves. Palahniuk's characters have not yet reached Bukatman's terminal identity as they have not yet found a way to combine technology and the human body in a way that satisfies humanity's drive for a sense of agency. For Bukatman, terminal identity requires that the human penetrate the terminal not vice versa and that the human should be able to function in and recognize that there is a whole other existence behind the screen, that is, an existence that incorporates both human and machinic qualities into a cyborg existence. Palahniuk's characters only see the surface of the screen that seems to be

penetrating the characters' space rather than being penetrated or utilized by the characters..

Panning out to the American public, it becomes clearer that this phenomenon is not confined to fiction but is an American social reality. Baudrillard points out that the tragedy of the American public is that they have yet to realize that they are simulations. He argues: "America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality. It is a hyperreality because it is a utopia which has behaved from the beginning as though it were already achieved [....] Americans, for their part, have no sense of simulation. They are themselves simulation in its most developed state, but they have no language in which to describe it, since they themselves are the model" (Baudrillard, *America* 28-9). At least in Palahniuk's novel some characters like Alexander and McFarland know they are free to play with reality, that they are terminals of a circular network even if they are not yet confident in their terminal existence. Baudrillard claims that this is the tragic truth that Postmodern America struggles to recognize in itself. Palahniuk's characters are also still obviously conflicted in their existence as terminals acting out predetermined roles juxtaposed with their lingering delusions of

individuality and human emotion. They have not yet reached the point of terminal identity that Bukatman describes as an existence that meshes together the human and the technological, leaving behind a sense of individuality and a soul. Palahniuk's characters are at the very cusp of terminal identity, an identity that does not look into the screen to find meaning or a soul that does not exist, but an agency that functions for the human as a terminal.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### ROLES, LABELS, AND THE END OF AN A PRIORI IDENTITY IN THE QUEST TOWARDS THE MODEL

Miss Scotia, your brother's  
having a seizure or  
something.

--Palahniuk, *Invisible  
Monsters* 190

The characters of *Invisible Monsters* do not function as individuals but as predetermined roles that their society recognizes. The characters of *Invisible Monsters* obsess with eradicating their past and encircling themselves in the pure spectacle, in the monitor screen, further complicating their ideas of human subjectivity. As the system implodes around them, McFarland especially harkens back to the humanistic idea of love and of an individual capable of such an emotion. The reality of their existence in the spectacle consists of labels or roles rather than individual identities. Because of these predetermined existences that spectators are subject to, Palahniuk's characters and Baudrillard's work point to the twenty-first century human subject's need to exert their

mere existence over all other things. Though the characters want to feel needed and loved by becoming the model, they are unable to find such feelings as they are imploding into one another and the objects they consume. Binaries such as private and public and subject and object are collapsing and the dividing lines between where one character ends and the other begins are evaporating. As we will see, the physical body itself becomes almost irrelevant in the terminal state of existence within the spectacle where individuality does not exist. Palahniuk's characters, however, still hold on to their physical bodies in an attempt to maintain a feeling of solidarity and existence in the terminal network that eliminates such a body. Giving primacy to the physical body holds the characters back from terminal identity that supports a machinic existence to the extreme of a human existing as an image on a screen without a physical body. Subjects depend on their relationships with other subjects and consumer products because a single terminal is nothing without the system to work upon it. Even Palahniuk's disjointing final chapters seem to be a hollow attempt to revive humanistic ideals in the characters of *Invisible Monsters* who have consistently been devoid of human emotion. Curiously, the

idea of the individual and the nostalgia for that existence lives on in Palahniuk's characters and Baudrillard's work despite the fact that there is no escape from the spectacle, the simulacrum, they inhabit and the terminal identity it requires. The idea of the individual and its ability to feel is an invalid existence that serves as a coping mechanism for spectators inebriated by the spectacle.

[E]ach of us thinks our role  
is the lead.

--Palahniuk, *Invisible  
Monsters* 16

The Impossibility of an Individual Identity  
with the Existence of Predetermined  
Subject Roles

The characters of *Invisible Monsters* are aware and admit that they are self-absorbed: they are constantly seeking the attention of someone else or of the anonymous masses. They harbor a competitive spirit that pushes them to out do their counterparts, to have the lead role in the drama of their hyperreal lives. In the opening and climatic scene of the novel, where McFarland burns down Cotrell's house and Cotrell shoots Alexander, supposedly



mistaking her for McFarland, McFarland says of the twisted trio, "Evie, Brandy and me, all this is just a power struggle for the spotlight. Just each of us being me, me, me first. The murderer, the victim, the witness, each of us thinks our role is the lead" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 16). None of the three women, Cotrell, Alexander, and McFarland, are looking to express or claim a humanistic identity with a depth and history to it, but are looking for labels or categories which they can fulfill. McFarland labels herself and her counterparts in order to force a differentiation, Cotrell - the murderer, Alexander - the victim, McFarland - the witness. Sadie Plant argues that roles are predetermined behaviors and traits that society labels and spectators play. Instead of individuals who create their own history or destiny, spectators are character types, pigeon-holed into certain roles. Plant says of these roles:

A variety of roles as broad and tempting as the spectrum of material commodities is offered for consumption that precludes the possibility of any real and autonomous engagement [....] Even the refusal of a pre-established set of commodified patterns leads us into the roles, equally pre-

ordained and unthreatening, of the individualist, the eccentric, the disaffected, or the revolutionary." (64-5)

Within the spectacle, there is no escape for characters like McFarland and Alexander who try desperately to remove themselves from the system, the spectacle, with McFarland's shot off jaw and Alexander's sexual reassignment surgeries. This idea is indicative of Jacques Derrida's own phrase, "There is nothing outside the text" (Derrida 158). Equally, there is nothing outside of the spectacle, the simulacrum, or the terminal network.

Jean Baudrillard also looks at the idea of identity as an impossibility since reality has been reduced to a label or a mere sign of existence. Identity becomes serial because humankind has lost what Baudrillard calls its "singularity", rendering it impossible for a person to differentiate him or herself from another. Baudrillard goes on to imply that previous to hyperreality humans strove for sovereignty, for a mastery and a completeness, where now, in the hyperreal state, we settle for a label, any marking that will make us feel singular, individual, and unique. He writes:

Identity is a dream that is pathetically absurd. You dream of being yourself when you have nothing better to do. You dream of yourself and gaining recognition when you have lost all singularity. Today we no longer fight for sovereignty or for glory, but for identity. Sovereignty was a mastery, identity is merely a reference. Sovereignty was adventurous; identity is linked to security (and also to the systems of verification which identify you). Identity is this obsession with appropriation of the liberated being, but a being liberated in sterile conditions, no longer knowing what he is. It is a label of existence without qualities.

(Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange* 52)

For Baudrillard, an identity is a label without any depth, just as for Palahniuk's characters their constantly changing names are unimportant even as they lack an inner being or true identity. Alexander, leaving her family and her gender behind her, loses sight of her biological origins. She is even mistakenly shot because of her striking and purposeful resemblance to her sister. Even McFarland, who is ignored by those she looks to for

affection and who was once adored as a beauty by a distant and faceless audience, has lost a sense of self. Struggling between being a visible beauty and an invisible monster, she can no longer pinpoint a single identity to cling to. These temporary and limited labels, such as murderer, victim, and witness allow the characters to hold on to a role, a one-word identity. As Virilio<sup>22</sup> points out, of humanity within the global communication systems that control it, "The individual [...] is losing his capacity to experience himself as a centre of energy" (*Open Sky* 144). With increasing globalization, Virilio argues that humans no longer feel that they have control over the spread of information or even their own self-perception. They are beginning to feel their state as terminals of a larger network.

The characters of *Invisible Monsters* do not have an individual identity with any depth, but a socially determined role, hence the constant need to assert their mere existence. McFarland's whole life and identity, like the other characters', is only surface deep. In the closing scene of the novel, McFarland decides to give Alexander her legal identity. McFarland's role is not a

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<sup>22</sup> See footnote 11.

complex myriad of memories, experiences, relationships, and behaviors, but is comprised merely of her identifying papers, her driver's license, her birth certificate, her social security card, and her occupation. While her brother, here called Shane, is sleeping in the hospital, recovering from being shot by Cotrell<sup>23</sup>, McFarland talks to her brother:

And I have to go, Shane, while you're still asleep. But I want to give you something. I want to give you life. This is my third chance, and I don't want to blow it. I could've opened my bedroom window.<sup>24</sup> I could've stopped Evie shooting you. The truth is I didn't so I'm giving you my life because I don't want it anymore. [....] This is all my identification, my

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<sup>23</sup> Evie Cotrell shoots Brandy Alexander in the opening scene of the novel when Alexander, McFarland, and Kelley arrive at Cotrell's wedding unexpectedly. Cotrell and Alexander had in fact planned the shooting just to spice up their lives while McFarland believed it to be a coincidence and that Alexander was mistakenly shot because she looked like McFarland.

<sup>24</sup> When Alexander and McFarland's parents discover that Alexander has gonorrhea, they kick Alexander out of their home. Alexander knocks on his sister, McFarland's, window to sneak back in the house. McFarland says nothing to Alexander and does not open the window to let her brother in.

birth certificate, my everything. You can be Shannon McFarland from now on. My career. The ninety-degree attention. It's yours. All of it. Everyone. I hope it's enough for you. It's everything I have left. (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 293)

As McFarland is separating herself from society, she takes the final step and gives her brother her legal identity, the identity that society holds her to. Society bestows upon each person one identity, one name, one gender. One's family bestows the role of sister, mother, aunt. One's workplace bestows the role of clerk, sale associate, waitress. McFarland is merely switching roles and no longer needs the labels of her other role she is rejecting. She decides to give Alexander her identity, her role as model, so McFarland can pursue other lower profile roles within the spectacle, to find another job in some other place, even perhaps as someone homeless.

Richard Lane points out Baudrillard's belief that humans assume culturally determined subject positions. He argues: "'[E]very group of individuals experiences a vital pressure to produce themselves meaningfully in a system of exchange and relationships'. Instead of the liberal-

humanist position, whereby human beings contain and express their inner and innate identities, Baudrillard is arguing that people are only ever given their identities by the social systems that precede them" (Lane 76). By Baudrillard's standards, McFarland has no innate identity, no inherent identity. She has several roles, all determined by the social systems, the spectacle, she functions in. She is a sister, a daughter, a model, a patient, a lover, a friend, and an enemy all at once; she merely rejects her role as Shannon McFarland, the model.

The characters' identities, their roles, are tied up in a moment in time and space but there is not an original, true, or a priori role for each character. Kelley is given several different roles to play during the trio's travels across Western North America, switching roles, behaviors, and speech with flexibility and ease. At one point, while scamming prescription drugs from the open houses they visit, Kelley plays out the role of Alexander's epileptic brother and feigns a seizure that completely frightens the real estate agent, Mr. Parker, who takes the seizure to be real. Mr. Parker says to Alexander, "'It's Ellis,' Mr. Parker says through the door. 'I think you should come downstairs. Miss Scotia, your brother's having a seizure

or something.' [....] 'After you have Ellis pinned to the floor,' Brandy says, 'wedge his mouth open with something. Do you have a wallet?'" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 190). Kelley performs the seizure and Alexander gives Mr. Parker detailed instructions on how to handle the situation. The ease with which Alexander, McFarland, and Kelley switch names and personae is characterized by what psychologist, Robert Jay Lifton, who Neal Gabler cites in *Life: The Movie*, describes as a symptom of living in a world without a past or a history. For Lifton, this flexibility of the self is a requirement of survival in a world that is without certainties or stability. Gabler summarizes Lifton's beliefs, saying,

As Lifton saw it, in every culture there had been individuals who had been forced to play numerous roles, but the confusion and disorientations of the twentieth century, the sense, as Lifton described it, "that we are losing our psychological moorings" and feel "buffeted about by unmanageable historical forces and social uncertainties," had made everyone a much more flexible and polished actor both because the traditional self was more besieged



than ever before and because one had to be a flexible performer in order to survive. (Gabler 226)

Lifton's description of the state of humanity in the twentieth century seems accurate to the experiences of Palahniuk's characters. In *Invisible Monsters*, Western culture no longer consists of humanistic individuals but rather actors who play several parts and have as much connection to one role as to any other. The spectacle that the novel's characters inhabit allows the characters only predetermined roles, rather than concrete and original identities they can call their own. Kelley's role as Manus Kelley is as real to him as his role of Seth Thomas or Alfa Romero, just as Alexander's role as Brandy Alexander is as viable as her role as Brandon McFarland or Miss Arden Scotia. With a malleable and created reality, a hyperreality, the self becomes a fluid phenomenon, a spectator/performer who plays several roles within the spectacle.

In this fluid hyperreality, Alexander not only changes her physical appearance and gender identity but also plays with the labels of dead and alive. The Rhea sisters tell

Alexander's parents that Brandon McFarland died of AIDS, though she lives on as Brandy Alexander. When Shannon McFarland finds out that Alexander is actually her brother, she has to adjust her reality. Not only is her brother slowly turning herself into a copy of Shannon McFarland, she is also alive and healthy. McFarland reflects on the discovery, thinking to herself,

Add to this her lipo, her silicon, her trachea shave, her browshave, her scalp advance, her forehead realignment, her rhino contouring to smooth her nose, her maxomilliary operations to shape her jaw. Add to all that years of electrolysis and a handful of hormones and anti androgens every day, and it's no wonder I didn't recognize her. Plus the idea my brother's been dead for years. You just don't expect to meet dead people. (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 198)

Reality is continually readjusted. McFarland finds out that her brother is still alive but waits until almost the end of the novel to tell Alexander that they are siblings. The McFarland parents never hear that their son is alive and going through a gender change. Their reality is that their son Brandon was gay and died from AIDS.

Identity and reality have become more fluid with the advent of electronic media, which Marshall McLuhan notes produces the confusion that results in humankind. In *The Medium is the Message*, which examines the changes in the sense of time and perception with electronic mass media, an anonymous person is asked who he is, and he answers, "'I-I hardly know sir, just at present - at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have changed several times since then'" (McLuhan 153-4). McLuhan describes electronic mass media as without a history, a past, or stability; human subjects are forced to constantly redefine themselves, to a point where it seems they cannot keep up with the speed of change. Baudrillard sees this lack of stability, this constant and incessant flux, as an implosion rather than an explosion. For Baudrillard, reality, identity, and lived experience collapse into the human subject that has complicated and surpassed binary logic. Where McLuhan sees the global village, the collapse of space and time in electronic mass media, as a positive influence, Baudrillard sees the terminal network where meaningful exchange within communication systems is impossible. Moving beyond the question of positive or negative, it becomes imperative that both Palahniuk's

characters and human subject of mass mediated societies incorporate and realize that a sense of freedom exists in the terminal state that does not privilege one identity or existence over another. Palahniuk's characters still feel unsatisfied and trapped by the terminal network because they have yet to find a compromise between their physical bodies and their desires of individuality within the disembodied terminal existence.

Maybe all this will get me a  
glimmer of attention.

--Palahniuk, *Invisible  
Monsters* 182

#### The Subject's Drive to Exert a Pure Existence

It is as if Baudrillard's notion of the collapse of singularity<sup>25</sup> pushes Palahniuk's characters to exert their pure existence. Both Palahniuk and Baudrillard are interested in the subject's desire to exert its own existence, to gain attention despite the fact that these subjects live out mere roles and labels rather than individual identities. After McFarland is released from

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<sup>25</sup> See page 85-86 (Baudrillard quote from *Impossible Exchange* 52)

the hospital, she stays with Cotrell in her gaudy and enormous mansion. McFarland almost disappears in this house, where Cotrell barely even talks to her and seems to have asked her friend to stay with her only so she can borrow McFarland's clothes. McFarland finds herself in a no-man's-land that exists between transitions from one role to another. While McFarland is home alone one night, Kelley sneaks into the house supposedly to kill McFarland<sup>26</sup>. At this moment, McFarland decides to break out of the house and take Kelley hostage at gunpoint. She sets Cotrell's house on fire and drives away with Kelley sedated in the trunk. McFarland thinks to herself: "Arson, kidnapping, I think I'm up to murder. Maybe all this will get me a glimmer of attention, not the good, glorious kind, but still the national media kind. Monster Girl Secret Brother Gal Pal" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 182). McFarland is not aiming at getting media attention but to merely feel that she exists, that she is not some deformed ghost hidden

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<sup>26</sup> While McFarland is staying at Cotrell's mansion after being released from the hospital, Cotrell convinces Kelley to sneak into the house with a knife and kill McFarland. McFarland finds Kelley in the house and keeps him at gunpoint and eventually kidnaps him. McFarland and Kelley were once a couple before Kelley and Cotrell started a relationship while McFarland was in the hospital recovering from her self-inflicted gunshot wound.

away in Cotrell's house. Throughout the novel, McFarland is trying to cope with being invisible and with disappearing but she still clings to the desire to be noticed. Baudrillard comments on a fear of disappearing by claiming that humans are so obsessed with asserting their identity that they can no longer take on the task of procreating, as having children puts one's "identity on the line" (Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* 29). The act of procreation requires that the parent's genetic material be manipulated and recombined to create a new human. This use of one's genetic material compromises one's sense of extreme individuality. Interestingly, none of the four major characters of *Invisible Monsters* could easily be viewed as the caring and nurturing parent.

Each act of the human subject becomes another attempt at assuring the subject that he or she does exist. Kelley clearly recognizes the hidden motives of supposedly kind gestures when he says to McFarland, "'The only reason why we ask other people how their weekend was is so we can tell them about our own weekend'" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 87). Every utterance and all actions in the novel appear to be aimed at gaining attention and exerting one's own

existence. Baudrillard, who sees the same behavior in the average American, writes:

The moon landing is the same kind of thing: "We did it!" The event was ultimately not really so surprising; it was an event pre-programmed into the course of science and progress. We did it. But it has not revived the millenarian dream of conquering space. In a sense, it has exhausted it [...] Graffiti carry the same message. They simply say: I'm so-and-so and I exist! They are free publicity for existence. Do we continually have to prove to ourselves that we exist? A strange sign of weakness, harbinger of a new fanaticism for a faceless performance, endlessly self-evident. (Baudrillard, *America* 21)

This phenomenon of merely exerting one's existence, which Baudrillard discusses and Palahniuk teases out, has no depth but only testifies to a surface, a façade or semblance of an identity. Nothing comes after the phrases "I exist" or "we did it" because once someone or something's existence has been asserted, once there is proof of it, the struggle is over and the mission complete. For instance, Alexander's struggle seems to be over once

McFarland leaves her all of her identification, her birth certificate, driver's license, social security card and so on. Alexander can now parade around with legal proof that she is who she has modeled herself to be.

What stings the most is that all the characters want are attention and acceptance, love and a sense of belonging, which, their world, devoid of stability, history, memories, affect, and charitable relationships, cannot provide for them. Alexander, not knowing that McFarland is her sister, almost begs her to have a romantic relationship with her. Alexander decided to become her sister because it was the biggest mistake she could think of, but also perhaps because she wanted the attention of being a model. Alexander wants to feel loved after being rejected by her family. While in a bathroom of a mansion that the trio is touring, Alexander says to McFarland,

"This wouldn't be a sister thing." Brandy says, "I still have some days left in my Real Life Training." [....] "It was supposed to come off after a year, but then I met you," she says. "I had my bags packed then I met you," she says. "I had my bags packed in the Congress Hotel for weeks just hoping you'd come to rescue me."



Brandy turns her other side to the mirror and searches. "I just loved you so much. I thought maybe it's not too late?" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 257)

Alexander is hoping that maybe she will not have to complete the surgery to find acceptance from someone, to be loved for the man that she is, the only quasi-altered version of herself. Even when leaving the Rhea sisters to go on the road trip with McFarland, Alexander discusses with the Rhea sisters how she wonders about, "Taking the hormones. For the rest of her life. The pills, the patches, the injections, for the rest of her life. And what if there was someone, just one person who could love her, who could make her life happy, just the way she was, without the hormones and make-up and the clothes and shoes and surgery? She has to at least look around the world a little" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 181). Unfortunately for Alexander, McFarland cannot love her the way she wants to be loved. McFarland's gesture of love is to give Alexander her identifying papers. For all the time that Alexander spent explaining to McFarland how much she did not want to be a woman and how she wanted to be loved by her sister, all that McFarland could do was help her

brother complete the gender reassignment surgeries that she did not want in the first place.

Palahniuk's characters want to feel needed or loved, to feel their own importance and how crucial it is that they exist. It is clear that McFarland craves the attention of her parents. While play acting in the department stores McFarland says to Cotrell: "'He was my big brother by a couple of years. His face was all exploded in a hairspray accident and you'd think my folks totally forgot they even had a second child,' I'd dab my eyes on the pillow shams and tell the audience. 'So I just keep working harder and harder for them to love me'"

(Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 73). McFarland is jealous of her brother's deformed face because it gets him attention and affection from their parents. It is a constant one-upping of who loves whom more, who needs whom more. For instance, Alexander is willing to change the course of her life if there is the potential of being needed more in one circumstance over another. This need to be needed goes back to exerting one's own existence. If someone is depending on you, it is imperative that you thrive, that you exist in order to support your dependant. The Rhea sisters point out to McFarland, when she comes to

take Alexander with her on the crazy road trip, that they depend on Alexander. "'We're the ones who love Brandy Alexander,' says Pie Rhea. 'But you're the one Brandy loves because you need her,' says Die Rhea. Gon Rhea says, 'The one you love and the one who loves you are never, ever the same person.' She says, 'Brandy will leave us if she thinks you need her, but we need her too'" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 178). The physical body itself is a mere terminal with names indicative of bacterial and viral diseases, such as diarrhea, pyuria, and gonorrhoea, passed from human to human. Each of these diseases affects and disrupts the transaction of major body systems, respectively, the gastrointestinal, urinary, and reproductive systems that keep the body terminal functioning. The physical body seems not only base but also unnecessary in a system that poses humans as terminals, as input/output functions similar to a machine.

The physical body as it functioned as a whole and individual state before technological, medical, and communication advancements, or what Virilio calls the animal body, begins to disappear in the world of electronic communication and in its place is the terminal state of the human body. Virilio says:

How can we fail to see how much such radiotechnologies (digital signal, video signal, radio signal) will shortly turn on their heads not only the nature of the human environment, our territorial body, but most importantly, the nature of the individual and their animal body? For the staking out of the territory with heavy material infrastructure (roads, railroads) is now giving way to control of the immaterial, or practically immaterial, environment (satellites, fiber optic cables), ending in the body terminal of man, of that interactive being who is both transmitter and receiver. (*Open Sky* 11)

For Virilio, the body has lost its sense of territory, and space. It has become a mere effect, boiled down to its lowest form as transmitter/receiver, pared down to a machine that is calculated and exact rather than the fleshy physical body created by some divine power with an individual identity, a soul, with feelings and thoughts. For Scott Bukatman, the physical body is a link to the humanistic individual that subjects try to hold onto in a terminal existence that eradicates it. Evaporating into the immaterial environment of the terminal network,

subjects cling to a sense of physical embodiment as "[t]he flesh continues to exist [in cyborg characters of science fiction] to ground the subjectivity of the character. To let go of the flesh, then, is to surrender the subject" (Bukatman 258). The human body becomes the sign of the nonterminal existence that Palahniuk's characters are not ready to erase. Afraid to lose the sensation or feeling of being human, the subject is hesitant to fully integrate itself into the technological systems that are redefining the physical body.

Communication technology has radically altered humanity's idea of the body and its function. The Rhea sisters claim to love Alexander because they need her, a love equal to gonorrhoea's lack of feeling for the host cells it needs to survive. Baudrillard would see the irrelevance of a soul in the terminal state. He says: "[O]ur learned neurologists will be able to locate the soul in the brain, just as they have located the linguistic function and the upright posture. Will it be found in the left or right hemisphere?" (*Ecstasy of Communication*, 50). This future that Baudrillard alludes to where all variables of existence will be calculated and knowable eradicates the human spirit in a terminal state. Palahniuk's characters

do not have inherent identities or souls that are battled over between the forces of good and evil. They are the transmitter/receiver pairs doing anything for attention from burning a face off with hairspray or feigning a seizure. Anything will do as long as it gets a reaction.

In all their efforts for attention, for gaining a sense of existence, the characters of *Invisible Monsters* have done away with the divide between private and public life just as they have eradicated the animal body and its sense of space. While Alexander and McFarland tour another open house, or rather an open mansion, Kelley, here named Ellis Island<sup>27</sup>, stays with the real estate agent to distract him while his counterparts look for prescription drugs to steal. When McFarland and Alexander return to Kelley and the real estate agent, they find Kelley in the middle of performing oral sex on the real estate agent, Mr. Parker.

We throw open the drawing room double doors and there's Mr. Parker and Ellis. Mr. Parker's pants are around his knees, his bare hairy ass is stuck up in the air. The rest of his bareness is stuck

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<sup>27</sup> Ellis Island is off the coast of New York where many immigrants had to stop to process their immigration papers before venturing further into the United States. Many of these immigrants changed their names to shed markers of their previous nationality.

in Ellis's face. Ellis Island, formerly Independent Special Contract Vice Operative Manus Kelley. "Oh yes, Just do that. That's so good." Ellis gets an A in job performances his hands are cupped around Parker's football scholarship power clean bare buns, pulling everything he can swallow into his square-jawed Nazi poster boy face. Ellis grunting and gagging, making his comeback from forced retirement. (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 261-2)

All of Kelley's repressed feelings about his own homosexuality, his aging, and consequent loss of his job are usually considered private matters not to be released with a stranger in some anonymous person's drawing room in front of two other people. Private thoughts and actions, secrets, seem to no longer be sacred or carefully guarded by an individual who needs to maintain a certain reputation. Nothing is personal anymore but everything is exposed in an attempt to make one's existence known. Baudrillard is puzzled by this pull to expose everything when he asks,

Why this fantasy of expelling the dark matter, making everything visible, making it real, and

forcibly expressing what has no desire to be expressed, forcibly exhuming the only things which ensure the continuity of the Nothing and of the secret? Why are we so lethally tempted into transparency, identity and existence at all costs? An unanswerable question." (Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange* 13)

Along this same line of reasoning, one might ask why doesn't humanity accept its state as terminal and forget this need for identity, for a distinguishable existence? Why do Palahniuk's characters desire differentiation through mutilations?

[T]he way you'd look if you  
got the cherry pie.

--Palahniuk, *Invisible  
Monsters* 136, 201

#### Surpassing Differentiation, Binaries, and Boundaries

Cotrell, like the other major characters of *Invisible Monsters*, live out multiple lives and identities. After Cotrell becomes a woman, she says to McFarland, "'It's not just my wanting to be a glamorous fashion model,' Evie would say. 'It's when I think of my growing up, I'm so



sad.' Evie would choke back her tears. She'd clutch her little sponge and say, 'When I was little, my parents wanted me to be a boy.' She'd say, 'I just never want to be that miserable again'" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 72). She sees herself as female only. Her previous existence as a man is a path that she turned from, a destiny left behind at a crossroad in life. Baudrillard describes the subject as both being able to choose one destiny over another in each moment in time while never escaping the destinies that the subject has rejected. Baudrillard sees all of humanity existing in this split where humans have to constantly make choices while at the same time at the intersection of all those choices. Man and woman meet in Cotrell and Alexander, ugly and beautiful meet in McFarland, homosexual and heterosexual meet in Kelley. Baudrillard illustrates this split in human destiny as a necessary demarcation in time, where the present is a moment of connection between the past and the future. This demarcation is the crossroads where differentiation and separation is forced. He writes:

We can recall moments in the past when we had equal chances of living or dying - in a car crash, for example. Naturally, the person

talking about it has chosen to survive but at the same time, the other has chosen death. Everytime someone finds himself at a crossroads of this kind, he has two worlds before him. One loses all reality, because he dies there; the other remains real, because he survives. He abandons the world in which he is now only dead, and settles into the one in which he is still alive. There is, then, a life in which he is alive and another in which he is dead. The bifurcation of the two, linked to a particular contingent detail, is sometimes so subtle that one cannot but believe that the fateful event is continuing its course elsewhere. (And indeed, it often appears in dreams, in which you relive it to the end.) This alternative is not, then, an entirely phantom one; it exists in the mind, and leads a parallel existence. We cannot speak of the unconscious here, since neither repression nor the return of the repressed is involved. It is merely that two units have separated and, though they are increasingly distant (my current life is increasingly different from the one which began

for the virtual dead man at that moment), they are indivisible. (Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange* 82)

Baudrillard moves away from a humanistic idea of a specific purpose in life to depict the subject as constantly redetermining its fate by choosing one avenue from the slew of options available at each point in time. Though Baudrillard depicts a duality to these choices made at crossroads, such as life or death, a multiplicity seems more accurate to the terminal state depicted in *Invisible Monsters* and to a Postmodern society that moves away from this kind of binary logic. Palahniuk makes this multiplicity clear in Cotrell's own feigned drama of her parents wanting her to be a boy. She was a boy and by continually mentioning her feelings about being male, the male destiny that she left behind still seems to live on. Cotrell is not free to exist just as a woman even after her surgeries. Moving beyond merely labeling Cotrell's female and male experiences, it becomes evident that these binary oppositions are not clear cut phenomena. Cotrell has always seen herself as female even though she did not start her gender reassignment surgeries until she was sixteen. However, genetically she has always been male. She does

not fit into either of the binary terms but does try to negotiate a space for herself in a culture that cannot define her. She brings up make believe problems with her parents about her sexuality and even makes up a new version of Cinderella, where Cinderella is a boy that the woodland creatures turn into a beautiful princess. Such multiple possible destinies affect one another with the beautiful McFarland haunting the deformed McFarland, the man in Cotrell and Alexander changing how they act and what they think. The human as terminal has numerous destinies whipping through it, keeping the human from being stable and individual. Human identity stays in a fluid state of flux.

Because the boundaries between subject and object, female and male, model and series have been blurred by advances in electronic mass media and technology, such classic tales as *Cinderella*, though a story of radical change, need to be further exaggerated to accommodate the subject in the terminal state that has moved beyond the binary. Cotrell manipulates the story of Cinderella during a photo shoot at a meat packing house. She tells McFarland her version of the fairy tale. "Evie starts telling me about an idea she has for a remake of *Cinderella*, only

instead of the little birds and animals making a dress, they do cosmetic surgery. Bluebirds give her a face lift. Squirrels give her implants. Snakes, liposuction. Plus, Cinderella starts out as a lonely little boy" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 243). In the simulacrum that Palahniuk's characters inhabit, everything is fluid including traditions, gender, the body, one's name, and one's identity. Ian Mitroff and Warren Bennis also take note of this fluidity of boundaries between binaries when examining the depiction of gender in popular culture, calling it "Boundary Warping". They use performers in music videos as examples of people who switch back from male to female and vice versa, challenging the boundaries that humanists would view as inherently different and separate, as a solid state of existence that cannot be manipulated (57). All the same, Cotrell is manipulating these binaries and the traditions that uphold them by carving out a space for her own existence that transcends the binary. Even the human body in *Invisible Monsters* will be relegated to the state of a patchwork quilt as Cotrell, McFarland, and Alexander manipulate their physical appearance. Whatever was original, solid, and singular in Cartesian thought has become a hodge podge in the twenty-

first century of various destinies, labels, body parts and so on.

In Palahniuk's novel, individuality and differentiation are not part of the characters' experiences when their identities continually collide into one another so that separating out one character from another becomes difficult and uncertain. McFarland describes her mouth: "The way my face is without a jaw, my throat just ends in sort of a hole with my tongue hanging out. Around the hole, the skin is all scar tissue: dark red lumps and shiny the way you'd look if you got the cherry pie in a pie eating contest" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 136). A mere sixty-five pages later Palahniuk uses the same imagery and almost the same sentence structure to describe Kelley, here named Ellis, after acting out a seizure to distract the real estate agent while McFarland and Alexander steal drugs and cosmetics. "Ellis's face is dark red and shining the way you'd look if you got the cherry pie in the pie eating contest. A runny finger painting mess of nosebleed and tears, snot and drool" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 201). Here is the death of the individual. When one person can be described exactly like another, they become interchangeable and replaceable rather than unique and

special individuals. McFarland, who is the girlfriend, the female, can be described exactly like her opposite, Kelley, who is the boyfriend, the male. Blending the differences between these binaries eliminates the hierarchy of the privileged positive term. This paves the way for the characters' existence in the terminal state, which is two dimensional and composed of terminals functioning on a plane without a hierarchy of terms, existences, or constructed identities.

[S]hopping feels like a game  
I haven't played since I was  
a little girl.

--Palahniuk, *Invisible  
Monsters* 54

#### Consumerism and Attempting to Attain the Model Existence

In the place of autonomous individuality, this supposed unique existence, are consumer products and the images and associations of those products. As the idea of a unique identity is eliminated, it becomes difficult to discern the subject from the consumer object. So too do the differences between the model and the series become

complicated as the model diffuses itself in the series and eradicates its existence. Alexander decides to make McFarland her own personal model, aspiring to look just like her sister who hates her. When McFarland comes to the Congress Hotel, where Alexander is staying with the Rhea sisters, Die Rhea explains to McFarland what Alexander aims to do:

To the picture on the stereo, to the smiling stupid face in the silver frame, Die Rhea says, "None of that is cheap." Die Rhea lifts the picture and holds it up to me, my past looking me eye to eye, and Die Rhea says, "This, this is how Brandy wanted to look, like her bitch sister. That was two years ago, before she had laser surgery to thin her vocal chords and then her trachea shave. She had her scalp advanced three centimeters to give her the right hairline. We paid for her brow shave to get rid of the bone ridge above her eyes that Miss Male used to have. We paid for her jaw contouring and her forehead feminization." (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 177)



Which of the siblings is the model and which begins the series is indiscernible as they are in flux, swapping from one to the other, making the model and series one in the same. McFarland is first beautiful, then Alexander goes through multiple surgeries to become beautiful. Later, the deformed McFarland secretly admires Alexander's good looks and tries to repress her yearnings to be beautiful again. This very juggling between model and series and the lack of difference between the two is what Baudrillard sees as the cornerstone of the hyperreal society that mass media creates. He says, "The socially immanent tendency whereby the series hews ever more narrowly to the model, while the model is continually being diffused into the series, has set up a perpetual dynamic which is in fact the very ideology of our society" (Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* 139). Perhaps this exchange between model and series is the dynamic element in the static existence of humanity as terminals. Trying to attain the model is what continues that one-upping behavior, that desire to have the most recognized role, a clear and acknowledged existence. Baudrillard takes note of this behavior in the fashion world, that cut-throat community that McFarland tries desperately to separate herself from while Alexander and

Cotrell gravitate towards it. Baudrillard writes: "A model is a rather pathetic thing. But take fashion for example. Fashion participates in this phenomenon absolutely. It doesn't depend on any sort of aesthetic judgment. It's not the beautiful opposed to the ugly, it's what's more beautiful than the beautiful" (Gane 112). In this hyperreal environment that Baudrillard describes, the question no longer lies in difference or upon a binary logic, but on degree, which implies a complication of both the ability to judge and to define a particular phenomenon.

But getting closer and closer to Baudrillard's "model", the ideal, is like reaching the end of the rainbow. No matter what products a person consumes or what role they have in society, attaining the absolute model, reaching the ideal, is always a breath away. Panning back to the larger American society and perceptions of that society from a global view shows the United States to be the worldwide model that other cultures reach for and perhaps even dream of. Baudrillard claims:

Today, America no longer has the same hegemony, no longer enjoys the same monopoly, but it is, in a sense, uncontested and uncontestable. It used to be a world power; it has now become a model -

and a universal one - even reaching as far as China. The international style is now American. There is no real opposition anymore; the combative periphery has now been absorbed; the great anti-capitalist ideology has been emptied of its substance. (Baudrillard, *America* 116)

Perhaps America is more powerful as a model than it ever was as a world power, as a political and economic force, just as McFarland has much more influence over her brother as a model to craft himself after than she ever has as a sister, someone who would love and care for her brother and ally with him when their parents ejected him from their home. Baudrillard places the idea of the model and series as the cornerstone of hyperreality's inability to exchange something for meaning. The model's seductive and unattainable qualities maintain the simulacrum that hyperreality creates.

In the simulacrum that Palahniuk's characters inhabit, only the series exists as the model is relegated to an idea that cannot manifest itself. The characters do not appear to be aware of how similar they actually are to one another, though they are almost painfully aware of the model they are trying to become, the unattainable they are

trying to capture. Palahniuk makes a comment about a doll named Katty Kathy who appears similar to Mattel's Barbie. The doll is the model, this ideal that society is looking for. The Rhea sisters made all their money for Alexander's surgeries by selling these dolls that put the impossible on a pedestal. McFarland says:

She's a doll, Katty Kathy is one of those foot high flesh-tone dolls with the impossible measurements. What she would be as a real woman is 46-16-26. As a real woman, Katty Kathy could buy a total of nothing off the rack. You know you've seen this doll. Comes naked in a plastic bubble pack for a dollar, but her clothes cost a fortune, that's how realistic she is. You can buy about four hundred tiny fashion separates that mix and match to create three tasteful outfits. In that way, the doll is incredibly lifelike. Chilling, even. (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 170)

With the indirect but obvious connection between Katty Kathy and Barbie, Palahniuk links the everyday lives of consumers with both fashion magazines and his characters. Baudrillard argues that in the quest to attain or become

the model, humans are bound and limited only to the series. In fact, the continuous series is what Baudrillard poses as the main characteristic of simulacra. The series is the "precession of the model", the wave-effect that occurs when a supposed ideal circulates through the masses.

Baudrillard writes,

[W]e are in a logic of simulation, which no longer has anything to do with a logic of facts and an order of reason. Simulation is characterized by a *precession of the model*, of all the models based on the merest fact - the models come first, their circulation, orbital like that of the bomb, constitutes the genuine magnetic field of the event" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra & Simulation* 16).

For Baudrillard, the model is what keeps the simulacrum from collapsing because it evokes the series that homogenizes the human experience as terminal, spectator, and consumer. That the Rhea sisters can support themselves and pay for all of Alexander's surgeries with the profits from Katty Kathy and that Mattel can pull millions of dollars in sales of Barbie products, shows how strong this drive towards the model is in consumer society.

Perhaps what becomes more challenging for humanity to cope with in the hyperreal state is not that there is no real, but that there is no individual distinguishable from the roles and the products they consume. With the spectacle that mass media and market capitalism uphold, the subject is reduced to the passive viewer/consumer of the images and objects offered to the subject. Bukatman states: "The spectacle controls by atomizing the population and reducing their capacities to function as an aggregate force, but also by displaying a surfeit of spectacular goods and lifestyles among which the viewer may electronically wander and experience a simulation of satisfaction" (Bukatman 36). The subject is appeased through images and objects of consumption that do not emphasize their political value. No longer an active subject, the human as viewer/consumer melts into the mere surface value of such consumer objects and advertised lifestyles. This does not stop characters like McFarland from trying to maintain a semblance of individuality, or some difference in a homogenized world. McFarland's doctors suggest that she get plastic surgery to repair her jaw while Alexander pushes McFarland to keep her deformity, to like what society trains her to hate and to find beauty

in what the world finds horrid. McFarland does not want to be a passive terminal of the system even though she clearly is. She says of her potential surgeries,

The books on plastic surgery, like pamphlets and brochures all promised to help me live a more normal, happy life; but less and less, this looked like what I'd want. What I wanted looked more and more like what I'd always been trained to want. What everybody wants. Give me attention. Flash. Give me beauty. Flash. Give me peace and happiness, a loving relationship, and a perfect home. Flash. (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 220)

McFarland does not want to be homogenized, to become just another part of a long series of other cookie-cutter people with predictable desires and reactions. Cotrell, however, plays into this homogenized existence, with fulfilling her career goals, having a grand home and getting married. The problem is, Cotrell had to change her sex to become a female model, McFarland keeps burning down her mansions, and her husband to be is having sex with Kelley in a closet on their wedding day. Whether the characters play the game of finding happiness or not, they will not find a sense of

contentment. The object takes on the role of happiness provider where the plastic surgery is supposed to make McFarland feel normal, more complete, and help her lead a happy life. She did not feel normal, complete, or happy before she shot her jaw off so why would she after surgery? The surgeries are only empty promises that, at best, can be partially fulfilled. Richard Lane points out, while examining modern-day consumerism, that when the subject is disappointed the consumer product or object is blamed.

"I wouldn't feel this way if I had waited for the next, better model of mobile phone..." and so on. Thus the waiting for happiness starts all over again. The processes of consumption are experienced therefore as magical, partly because the signs of happiness have replaced "real", total satisfaction, and because those signs are used to invoke the endlessly deferred arrival of total satisfaction. (Lane 71)

In a similar way, Palahniuk's characters are not content in and of themselves. They depend on the acceptance of an anonymous audience to feel complete or appear to be successful and normal to others. McFarland sees this to be a vain attempt at happiness but does not arrive at an



effective alternative. Total satisfaction or happiness in advanced capitalist societies is linked to objects or products that a consumer amasses as the human subject does not have an inherent identity that is apart from and distinguishable from other subjects and objects.

In fact, in the simulacrum of *Invisible Monsters*, there is no viable reason to oppose the serialization and reproduction of humans, which is the predictable outcome of commercialization. McFarland and Alexander do not see anything wrong in Alexander's choice to become her sister. Although they are not clones, the relationship between these siblings, as well as with the other major characters of the novel, call to mind some thoughts that have arisen from the discourse surrounding the issue of cloning. Not only are McFarland and Alexander more and more alike, with their twin facial deformities and their strikingly similar appearance due to Alexander's surgeries, McFarland and Kelley are described using the same phrases in the novel at different points in time. Kelley is the only man of the major characters that still presents himself as male but McFarland and Alexander are continually feeding him female hormones. All these similarities bring the characters closer and closer to becoming identical. The characters

are no longer individuals and their physical bodies become bits of information that can be processed, copied, or manipulated. For Baudrillard, this marks an era where the reproduction of the human body seems a logical next step to the spread of electronic mass media. He states:

This is what happens to the body when it ceases to be conceived as anything but a message, as a stockpile of information and of messages, as fodder for data processing. Thus, nothing is opposed to the body being serially reproduced in the same way [Walter] Benjamin describes the reproduction of industrial objects and the images of the mass media" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra & Simulation* 99-100).

The role of the human subject as object seems to be the default role in a heavily electronically mediated society such as the one depicted in *Invisible Monsters*. Alexander suggests to McFarland, if humanity thinks of itself as a car or any consumer object, it is not shocking to see humans as manipulated, serialized, and depersonalized (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 217).

For Baudrillard, being a consumer is a quasi-neohumanism as consumers are given the illusion of autonomy

and ability to choose when, in fact, market capitalism requires the consumer to choose from a limited selection, opting for an item, not because of its use or function, but for one's associations with a label. The idea of the model and the label comes up again in a different way in the scene where McFarland has just left the hospital after her recovery and walks through a supermarket. Without her veil, she scares all the shoppers with her horrendous face. She is so far from the ideal appearance of a young woman that she is shocking. Rather than being so beautiful and being admired, as she was prior to shooting off her jaw, now she is so terrifying that she shocks viewers in the opposite way. They reel back because she is different from what society is expecting. Humanity is looking for commodities in a pretty little wrapper, something appealing that will draw in an audience or more consumers. McFarland walks down the aisles looking at all the packaged food, playing the game of choosing what looks the best:

Going outside, the world is all color after the white-on-white of the hospital. It's going over the rainbow. I walk up to a supermarket, and shopping feels like a game I haven't played since I was a little girl. Here are all my favorite

name-brand products, all those colors, French's Mustard, Rice A Roni, Top Ramen, everything trying to catch your attention. All that color. A whole shift in the beauty standard so that no one really stands out. The total being less than the sum of the parts. All that color all in one place. (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 54)

Appearance is crucial. Each product on those grocery shelves appears to be the perfect product that is homogenized, categorizable, and at the same time extraordinary, that stands out above the rest. Every product appears as the model, just as all the shoppers want to be close to the model human in appearance. McFarland calls shopping a game because it is exactly that. With all the mustard, rice and noodle brands vying to be the best, exercising a consumer's right to choose alongside the power of advertising seemingly transforms, as Baudrillard accurately points out, "a purely commercial relationship into a personal one" (Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* 172). He argues that the consumer no longer has the option of not choosing as nothing is sold for what it simply is (*The System of Objects* 141). Noodles are not sold as just plain noodles. There are Top Ramen, Campbell's, Lipton's,

Barilla, and Cup-o-Noodles. Choosing noodles is personal, or at least made to seem personal. McFarland chooses Top Ramen because she grew up with it. The noodles she bought as a child become a part of her identity, an identity made up of what consumer products she feels attached to, whatever noodles give her that warm fuzzy feeling of childhood that comes with the label, Top Ramen.

Baudrillard's description of consumerism is accurate to McFarland's feelings while shopping at a super market. He exerts and I agree that, "'Free to be oneself' really means free to project one's desires onto commodities"

(Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* 185-6). Being free to be oneself means that one is free to choose from a limited number of huge corporations to identify with. Bukatman points out of the consumption of televised images: "[T]he range of choice is illusory. The viewer is always passive before the spectacle; the act of viewing amounts to an act of surrender" (Bukatman 39). What Bukatman views as the passive roles of the subject in the face of mass media, equally applies to the consumer in an advanced capitalist society. Consumers think they are individuals acting out their personal beliefs and choices, when it is the larger system, the advertisements that corporations flood the mass

media with that act upon the consumer. McFarland chooses Top Ramen because that is what she was conditioned to choose not because she has a free will and opinion apart from what society has constructed for her.

Cotrell's case is a clear example of both the illlusiveness of the model existence and of this phenomenon where the consumer product is blamed for the subject's shortcomings. Cotrell's mother blames Evan/Evie's desire to become a woman, at least partly on *Vogue* magazine. The fashion magazine, filled from cover to cover with photographs of impossibly thin and digitally enhanced women in outrageously priced clothing, posits a model existence that Cotrell supposedly decides will be her ultimate goal. Cotrell's mother talks to McFarland and Alexander, saying,

"Why, it plum broke our hearts the day Evan came to us. Sixteen years old, and he says 'Mommy, Daddy, I want to be a girl,' says Mrs. Cotrell. "But we paid for it," she says. "A tax deduction is a tax deduction. Evan wanted to be a world-famous fashion model, he told us. He started calling himself Evie, and I canceled my subscription to *Vogue* the next day. I felt it

had done enough damage to my family." (Palahniuk,  
*Invisible Monsters* 268-9)

Even with the surgeries and the expensive lifestyle her parents could afford for her, Cotrell could only be a smalltime model, working low end advertisements and infomercials. Despite everything, Cotrell's hands were still too big, and her face not quite pretty enough to become the world-famous fashion model she dreamed of being. Cotrell can never become like the models she saw in *Vogue* magazine and Mrs. Cotrell can continue to blame *Vogue* for her own disappointment or pain.

At this rate, we'll never get  
to the future.

--Palahniuk, *Invisible  
Monsters* 105

Escaping an Escape Velocity: Renegotiating Human  
Subjectivity within the Terminal State

With the characters' collisions into one another and the push to exert their existence and desire to be needed, the two final chapters of *Invisible Monsters* pose some contradictions about love and acceptance and McFarland's and Alexander's futures that trouble the novel's postmodern sensibilities. McFarland admits that she is tired of the

world of appearances and wants something of content that she feels she cannot have while she is still beautiful, saying "Nobody drags them [ugly girls] out at night so they can't finish their doctoral thesis papers. They don't get yelled at by fashion photographers if they get infected ingrown bikini hairs" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 286). She is assuming that there is something behind the appearances, behind the spectacle she lives in. Even the scene where Cotrell guns down Alexander is revealed as a planned event, concocted by Cotrell and Alexander to spice up their lives. Everything about McFarland's life is a spectacle. Her job as a model depends solely on appearance; all the names she assumes and the roles she plays are encompassed by the spectacle.

While Cotrell and Alexander are playing within the spectacle, McFarland thinks she can simply walk away from it. The problem is McFarland is not leaving the spectacle, the hyperreal, the system of terminals of which she belongs. She says to her brother before she leaves him alone in the hospital, "I just want to be invisible. Maybe I'll become a belly dancer in my veils. Become a nun and work in a leper colony where nobody is complete. I'll be an ice hockey goalie and wear a mask" (Palahniuk, *Invisible*



*Monsters* 295). What she sees as leaving the spectacle is merely changing roles, estranging herself further from her family by leaving her brother after already divorcing herself from her parents. McFarland's final statement, her confession of love, seems hollow after three hundred pages of unstable identities and constant jealousy and hatred aimed at her brother. Perhaps she is only following Alexander's advice to love what society trains its subjects to hate, to find beauty in the ugly. The closing lines of the novel read: "Completely and totally, permanently and without hope, forever and ever I love Brandy Alexander. And that's enough" (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 297). But this seems to serve as Palahniuk's crutch. If McFarland can convince the anonymous masses that she has genuine human feelings towards her brother, that she is an individual who loves, she can resign herself to her state as terminal, as if she were ever anything but a terminal, a product, and a subject. She wants to prove that she is an individual with human feelings and morals but her existence in a terminal state exposes the absence of these humanistic ideals. She does not love her brother in any recognizable sense since she does not cry when she's shot, or feel any pain upon discovering that Alexander was molested as a teen

by Kelley. McFarland bows out with a supposed gesture of love, a few words and some legal documents. This scene could have easily been a sales transaction at a car dealership or a courier delivering divorce papers to an indifferent spouse.

No matter where Palahniuk's characters look within the terminal network, they do not find love or acceptance. Alexander begs her sister to love her. Cotrell pleads to an audience that does not give her attention or acceptance. Kelley is waiting for a time when it is okay to admit that he is gay. He is desperate to be remembered and cherished by his parents. And lastly, McFarland is trying to escape society and relationships but still, at the end of the novel, feels obligated to give a meager gesture of loving her brother by giving Alexander her identifying papers. Perhaps the most poignant scene of the entire novel is when Kelley, Alexander, and McFarland are on top of the Space Needle writing postcards to the future and throwing them off the side of the building. McFarland's postcard gets caught in the suicide net below the Space Needle and eventually blows down onto their own car. Alexander finds the postcard and reads it.

Even if I overcompensate, nobody will ever want me. Not Seth. Not my folks. You can't kiss someone who has no lips. Oh, love me, love me, love me, love me, love me, love me, love me, love me. I'll be anybody you want me to be. Brandy Alexander, her big hand lifts the postcard. The queen supreme reads it to herself, silent, and slips the postcard into her handbag. Princess Princess, she says, "At this rate, we'll never get to the future." (Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* 105)

The future has no sign of acceptance or of love, but instead is a world that pushes humans to constantly change, to be forever trying to compensate for being only a surface, an effect, and a label. McFarland's plea of "love me, love me, love me" written on her postcard goes ignored just as Cotrell's identical plea to the infomercial audience falls on deaf ears.

Always pushing to become the model, Palahniuk's characters, and perhaps American society, miss the fact that they exist as terminals in an enormous system, as stationary points that realities and identities flow through with indifference, and a lack of emotion or

importance. What all those realities or identities mean is irrelevant; the characters of *Invisible Monsters* are just like groceries dragged across the price scanner. With all their delusions of finding love and acceptance, Kelley is still having sex with men in closets, Cotrell remains a washed up mediocre model, Alexander goes on with her gender reassignment surgeries, and McFarland, who, in the end, claims to love Alexander, cannot stay to harbor a meaningful relationship and decides to switch roles, leaving her brother behind. Their lives in the simulacrum, their hyperreal identities, their ploys to get attention, and their entangled relationships with mass media, consumer products, and with each other do not show them as unique individuals but as indistinguishable, as so closely tied to everything around them that boundaries and difference no longer exist. They have all imploded into strikingly similar terminals on a common system of communication, creating the terminal network.

While Palahniuk harks back to the humanistic idea of love and Baudrillard laments the time when individualism at least appeared to exist, both writers suggest that humans can no longer escape the spectacle. This nostalgia of humanist thought in Palahniuk, Baudrillard, and in the

larger American public is its own simulation of individualism, but there is nothing behind this nostalgia, no autonomous individual, and no divine identity. Nostalgia, history, family are just more effects of the larger system, the spectacle that consumes the masses. Even the Situationists' cries for revolt peters down to an almost pathetic sounding plea from the past, from a time that believed there was something outside of the spectacle. Perhaps not as extreme as the characters of *Invisible Monsters*, average Americans experience the nostalgia for individualism while they exist in a simulacrum, aided and perpetuated by mass media, simultaneously. Baudrillard and the Situationists are more concerned with the spectacle's influence and succession over reality. The problem for the American public, like the characters of *Invisible Monsters*, is the loss of the appearance of an autonomous individual which they still cling to and lean upon in coping with living in a spectacle without escape. Perhaps the greatest fear of the Postmodern subject within the terminal network is not that there is nothing behind the simulacrum, but that there is no one behind it. A sense of self and individuality is the extra baggage that must be left behind in moving into the terminal identity. Bukatman cites

Georges Bataille's views of the dissolution of the subject, that which Bataille calls "the crisis of existence" (Bukatman 279). Bukatman states: "Expenditure, sacrifice, mutilation, madness - Bataille's *excremental unreason* demolishes a prospect of a guiding rationality that withholds, that renounces, and that ultimately fails to conscribe what is human within the artificial confines of a *self*. 'The one who sacrifices is free,' Bataille writes, 'free to throw himself suddenly outside of *himself*'" (Bukatman 280). McFarland's act of giving away her legal identity to Alexander is a way to free herself from herself. No longer held to her legal identity, McFarland virtually disappears, leaving the hospital without a face, a family, or a legal identity. She eradicates her own existence as an individual only to be engulfed by the anonymous terminal network.

Palahniuk and Baudrillard obviously exaggerate Western culture's, and particularly American society's, difficulties in coping with the death of the autonomous individual in the terminal network. This exaggeration, however, is a blunt and frighteningly predictable outcome of the hidden functions of mass media and market capitalism that gradually and silently chip away at any sense of

agency the subject clings to and believes it still has. An active attempt to renegotiate the autonomy of the subject is necessary in a quickly evolving global society, whose next crucial step will be understanding how the experience that the terminal network provides alters human existence and how to disperse the economical and political power that market capitalism invests in a select few. Though Palahniuk and Baudrillard do not discuss the political or economical implications of their cultural exaggerations, it is there that we must turn in considering how society and humanity should function in a world that has given up its belief in humanism and metanarratives. Though Baudrillard is firm in his convictions about the state of the subject as a network terminal, Palahniuk's characters are still negotiating between the postmodern world they live in and the humanistic sensibilities that cast their shadows over the terminal network. While McFarland appears to integrate herself into the terminal and eradicate her own sense of self, she claims to do it out of love for her brother. McFarland and the other characters teeter back and forth between accepting the terminal state and pushing for an individuality that does not exist. They cannot and do not deny that they exist in a terminal network perpetuated by

mass media and consumerism. This postmodern world where the subject lives in a terminal state appears to be a closed system, and despite Baudrillard and Palahniuk's despair over the loss of the autonomous individual, they realize that the humanistic individual is no longer an option. Unfortunately neither Palahniuk nor Baudrillard pose an escape or alternate existence to that of the terminal state. The human subject must negotiate its own sense of agency within the terminal network, a neo-agency that embraces Bukatman's terminal identity and is aware of the limitations of the terminal network but nevertheless deploys the limitless manipulations available to the human subject as network terminal. For Bukatman, the human subject must let go of this idea of the primacy of the human and embrace the potential of freedom and agency that comes with a terminal identity that supports a cyborg existence. What authors like Bukatman and even Palahniuk suggest is that humanity must negotiate and adapt itself to a new subjectivity that incorporates terminal identity, an existence that requires a violent rejection of the antiquated notion of an autonomous individual.



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