

**PROVOCATIVE WRITING:  
THE DISGUSTING AND TABOO  
FICTIONAL LANDSCAPE  
IN CHUCK PALAHNUIK**

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## **Statement of Authentication**

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

  
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## **Declaration**

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I declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to external support for my thesis.

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## Abstract

The thesis discusses the ways in which Chuck Palahniuk, one of America's most contentious authors, explores ideas of the taboo and unspeakable, and answers the question: is Palahniuk using taboo subjects solely to disgust and shock readers, or for an additional purpose, such as challenging readers' assumptions about ideas of difference? The taboo here accounts for the proscribed and non-normative, as it pertains to gender, beauty, sexuality and desire. These themes are evident in the novels I examine: *Fight Club* (1996), *Invisible Monsters Remix* (1999), *Haunted* (2005) and *Beautiful You* (2014). Palahniuk disgusts and shocks his readers through crude and dark humour and extremely graphic depictions of sex and violence. I examine whether Palahniuk's fiction functions as social critique and satire, particularly in terms of his exploration of issues such as rape, transgender identity and masculinity, or if his work has been rightly dismissed as mere adolescent shock writing. I argue that Palahniuk utilizes tactics of shock and excess to prompt his readers to reflect on their own attitudes about norms pertaining to sex, gender and identity. Although Palahniuk reads as crude and immature, I demonstrate that his novels offer substantive explorations into ideas of difference and otherness, the constructedness of gender, and women's representation in media.

## Introduction

Chuck Palahniuk, American novelist and journalist, deals almost exclusively with the cultural work of taboo. Palahniuk is best known as the author of *Fight Club* (1996), which was later made into a film of the same name by Academy award nominated filmmaker David Fincher.<sup>1</sup> According to Palahniuk's website, *The Cult*, it was the "film's popularity [that] drove sales of the novel," which explains the interest in the film in favour of the novel (at least to the general public).<sup>1</sup> His novels fit within the genre of transgressive fiction, a genre that deals with issues of self-destruction, sexual deviancy, deformity and violence. This thesis explores the nature of taboo, as represented in the works of Palahniuk, and answers the question: Is Palahniuk using taboo subjects not only to disgust and shock readers, but also for some higher purpose, such as challenging readers' assumptions about ideas of difference.

The English word taboo "is derived from the Polynesian word 'tabu' ... [and], in the languages of Polynesia, the word simply means 'to forbid,' 'forbidden,' and can be applied to any sort of prohibition."<sup>2</sup> According to anthropologist Margaret Mead, in her article 'Tabu,' the taboo "[describes] prohibitions against participation in any situation of such inherent danger that the very act of participation will recoil upon the violator of the tabu."<sup>3</sup> Gurr argues that the taboo can be understood in terms of renunciation, a proscription against perversion and paraphilia such as "incest, cannibalism, certain sexual practices [and] irreligious behaviour."<sup>4</sup> The taboo is concerned with issues of obedience and the repression of those primal desires, or, as Franz Steiner suggests, "dangerous behaviour" that is considered harmful to society.<sup>5</sup> However, this thesis explores how Palahniuk questions the

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<sup>1</sup> Chaplinsky, "Strange But True: A Short Biography."

<sup>2</sup> Radcliffe-Brown, *Taboo*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Steiner, *Taboo*, 22.

<sup>4</sup> Gurr, "Literature, Transparency, Ideology," 73.

<sup>5</sup> Steiner, *Taboo*, 21.

oppressive nature of social norms, and permits characters to act out their innermost desires as an expression of identity. I will discuss how Palahniuk presents instances of taboo not only to disgust and shock readers, but to elucidate issues of contemporary significance, including representations of the animalistic and what it means to be human, and modern beauty standards and hyper-femininity.

Transgressive themes such as sexual deviancy and violence have become a hallmark of postmodern literature: “the transgressive is reflexive, questioning both its’ own role and that of the culture that has defined it in its otherness.”<sup>6</sup> According to Stefan Horlacher, in his study of taboo and transgression, it is difficult to reach “consensus any longer on what constitutes taboos today,” as, much like disgust, the taboo is culturally determined and specific.<sup>7</sup> In this thesis I will explore the ways in which Palahniuk disgusts and shocks his readers, whether it be through crude and dark humour, or graphic depictions of sex and violence, and how he uses disgust as a mechanism to interrogate social norms regarding gender, desire and identity.

Palahniuk has been criticized for being gimmicky and tacky: “the literary equivalent of a shock jock.”<sup>8</sup> His penchant for sensationalism, colloquialism, exploitation, and ludicrous narratives form the basis of this critique. His novel *Haunted* (2005) sees Palahniuk “create horror around very ordinary things: carrots, candles, swimming pools, microwave popcorn, bowling balls.”<sup>9</sup> Like much postmodernism, Palahniuk attacks the seriousness of canonical literature and art. The rise of Dadaism and Pop Art, art that challenged and troubled social and cultural assumptions about what constitutes art, invariably “lowered the barrier between what was considered high and low art”<sup>10</sup> This is illustrated in famous works such as Warhol’s

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<sup>6</sup> Jervis, *Transgressing the Modern Explorations*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Horlacher, “Taboo, Transgression and Literature,” 5.

<sup>8</sup> Jacobs, “Just Shut Up.”

<sup>9</sup> Palahniuk, “67 people fainted.”

<sup>10</sup> Cotton, “The Decade that Blurred the Line.”



iconic *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962) and Duchamp's Dadaist *Fountain* (1917). While initially considered vulgar and low-brow, such movements were soon "accepted in the highest echelons of the fine art world."<sup>11</sup> There has been similar debate as to whether Palahniuk's novels are deserving of serious consideration, which may explain why there has been little scholarship published on Palahniuk or his fiction, with the exception of David Fincher's 1999 film adaptation of Palahniuk's debut novel *Fight Club*. Through the course of this thesis I will argue that Palahniuk utilizes disgust and shock so that his readers are forced to consider important issues including desire, sexuality and identity and the relationship between sex, patriarchal culture and violence.

That said, Palahniuk goes out of his way to promote a public persona of *enfant terrible*, as evident with his public readings and social media presence. Palahniuk has been known to throw rubber limbs into the audience during these readings: "At readings, he pelts the audience with artificial limbs, wrestling masks and plastic vomit - behaviour which, his readers might assume, is altogether in character for Palahniuk."<sup>12</sup> Palahniuk is redefining the public interface between author and reader — one of his accredited novels, titled *Burnt Tongues* (2014), is completely composed of the short stories written by his followers. Palahniuk himself, along with the authors Richard Thomas and Dennis Widmyer, selected and edited the fan-made stories for publishing. By doing so, Palahniuk is empowering his readers to have a voice and express themselves. It is because of Palahniuk's disposition towards the taboo, both evident in his novels and as a part of his public persona, that I have chosen this transgressive author for study, and because I believe his work warrants more sustained and diverse critical attention. In the chapters that follow, I explore ideas of the taboo and the unspeakable in the novels *Haunted*, *Invisible Monsters Remix* (1999), *Beautiful You* (2014) and *Fight Club* in relation to themes and issues including embodiment, sexuality,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Chalmers, "Stranger than Fiction."

violence and gender. Much like the Beat poets of the 1950s and 1960s, Palahniuk re-contextualises the literary space, because he sought to incite a reaction from the reader: “the Beat Generation was ... a performance movement as well as a literary movement.”<sup>13</sup> Palahniuk’s colloquial style, exploration of sexuality and desire, and engagement with the taboo, could be understood as a homage to the Beat generation.

Palahniuk has received more notoriety for his “pop-pulp shock value than for [his] philosophy.”<sup>14</sup> A self-proclaimed ‘dangerous writer,’ he aims to shock, disgust, and provoke, as well as amuse. His novels, despite being controversial, have developed a strong cult following: he is a target of critics but a favourite with fans. Critics condemn Palahniuk’s colloquial writing style and absurd plot lines, as evident with blog titles such as ‘First rule of Fight Club: no one talks about the quality of the writing’<sup>15</sup> and ‘*Beautiful You* Makes Sex And Death Boring.’<sup>16</sup> His style of writing is as much an outcast as the characters he writes about in his novels. Palahniuk’s characters are designed to shock and disgust readers, existing on the fringes of society as models of eccentricity, weirdness and non-normativity. Palahniuk consciously subverts what he considers to be the pretentiousness of good taste (in life and in literature), by engaging with subjects and topics that are conventionally considered to be far too low brow for literature: “people get pissy because they have an expectation that a book will be about culture with a capital c.”<sup>17</sup> For example, Palahniuk, in his novel *Beautiful You*, explores constructions of femininity and sexual pleasure through the lens of pornography. Pornography and explicit sex scenes in film are considered taboo, especially in mainstream cinema: “Recent reports suggest that sexual content is actually a turn-off for the box office... Mainstream audiences simply aren’t interested, not on the big screen, at least.”<sup>18</sup> This is

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<sup>13</sup> Carmona, “Keeping the Beat.”

<sup>14</sup> “Dangerous Writing.”

<sup>15</sup> Jordison, “First rule of Fight Club.”

<sup>16</sup> Sheehan, “Beautiful You Makes Sex and Death Boring”.

<sup>17</sup> Chalmers, “Stranger than Fiction.”

<sup>18</sup> Barber, “Sex on screen.”

evidenced in Abdellatif Kechiche's independent film *Blue is the Warmest Colour*, which had an eight minute lesbian sex scene, and was, regardless, the winner of the 66<sup>th</sup> Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival.<sup>19</sup> Sex in film is only acceptable when it is believed to have some higher purpose, as is delineated by its place in the arthouse film. Palahniuk's representation of sex is, unlike contemporary filmmakers such as Lars Von Trier and Kechiche, not at all artful or titillating, but more often perverse and violent, including depictions of rape. Palahniuk has therefore assumed the role of *enfant terrible*, mostly liberated from the constraints of political correctness and literary taste. There is a deliberate immaturity evident in Palahniuk's work, as he presents issues of real gravity, such as rape, in a crude and juvenile manner.

Keesey, however, believes Palahniuk's novels function as "social satire directed at specific ills that he diagnoses and wishes to cure."<sup>20</sup> Although I would agree that Palahniuk is a satirist first and foremost, interrogating conventional ideals of gender, beauty and power, I don't believe that he 'diagnoses' issues — rather Palahniuk's novels are a little like a mirror, held up to each reader for them to reflect on their own biases and sensibilities. This would help explain why Palahniuk doesn't necessarily take clear positions on the issues he raises but instead leaves the process of judgement up to the reader.

Palahniuk is the author of twenty-one novels<sup>21</sup> which have sold more than five million copies in the United States by 2016, regardless of the confronting nature of his novels.<sup>22</sup> I believe that his readers, now fully aware of the tropes of his fiction, approach his novels with a set of expectations — that is, to be shocked and, at times, appalled. Palahniuk is meeting the readers' desire for the taboo and proscribed, and to engage with what is forbidden — a classic example of such desire is evident in pornography. In order to meet such desires,

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<sup>19</sup> Dargis, "Story of Young Woman's Awakening."

<sup>20</sup> "Understanding Chuck Palahniuk."

<sup>21</sup> "Books by Chuck Palahniuk."

<sup>22</sup> "Chuck Palahniuk."

Palahniuk follows a strategy of escalation, continually pushing the boundaries of decency: “I think, this is the most offensive thing I will ever write. But no. I always surprise myself.”<sup>23</sup>

Palahniuk seeks to produce a visceral response in his reader, whether that be shock or disgust, through engagement with the taboo. His public readings best showcase his apparent desire to excite, amuse and, most importantly, shock — there have been 73 documented incidents of fainting in his book tours. Palahniuk, on his own website *The Cult*, speaks openly about audience reactions to his short story *Guts*, and, in turn, his own gratification in producing experiences of shock and disgust in his readers and audience: “The next day in Seattle, at a lunchtime reading for the employees of a high-tech corporation, two more men fainted. Two big men. At the same moment in the story, both of them fell so hard that their chrome chairs flipped and clattered loud on the polished hardwood floor of the auditorium.”<sup>24</sup> These public readings allow Palahniuk the opportunity to adopt the role of performer, and his readings essentially function as performance art. As mentioned above, he is known to throw plastic severed limbs into the audience at shows, and even autograph them as souvenirs (as seen at New York Comic-Con) — the shows act as an extension of his fiction, provocative, somewhat juvenile, laddish and shocking.

Through his oeuvre, Palahniuk explores the taboo as it pertains to ideas of gender, beauty and sexual desire. The following chapters of my thesis explore the ways in which Palahniuk’s fiction seeks to encourage an affective response from the reader, and the ways in which his treatment of the taboo, in relation to sexuality, pornography and violence, assists in such an aim. Chapter One examines the concepts of disgust and shock as they pertain to Palahniuk’s fiction. While I do not attempt to make any universal claims about reader response, I do examine how Palahniuk’s fiction, whether through humour, horror or moral ambiguity, functions to promote a visceral reaction. The chapter explores the work of other

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<sup>23</sup> Glaister, “I dare you.”

<sup>24</sup> Palahniuk, “The Guts Effect.”

authors that similarly seek to evoke feelings of disgust and shock, such as Tom Six's *The Human Centipede*, Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* and Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, in order to understand how Palahniuk's fiction specifically confronts and troubles the reader. I analyse film because I believe there is a strong similarity between Palahniuk's novels and the sensationalist/exploitative cinema of the above directors. The subsequent chapters, each named after a key taboo presented in Palahniuk's novels, explores whether Palahniuk's fiction functions as social satire or mere adolescent shock writing (although, that is not to say that he cannot do both).

Chapter Two, *Embodiment and Monstrosity*, explores how Palahniuk's fiction uses models of difference, including deformity and disability, as a revolt against social repression and oppression. Although Palahniuk is undeniably and deliberately politically incorrect, I do not believe his novels function as homophobic or racist texts. I argue that Palahniuk presents deformity and any deviations from the norm as repulsive in order to highlight society's instinctive rejection of difference. Whilst the characters presented in Palahniuk's novels are hyperbolic models of difference, we discover that they are not simply monsters of excess, but rather fully formed human beings (beyond the superficial trappings of appearance). Chapter Three, *Homoeroticism and Masculinity* explores the ways in which Palahniuk questions the pressures to conform to particular models of masculinity. Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club* subverts gender norms and hierarchies, by presenting masculinity in crisis and the performativity of gender and sexuality. Palahniuk is concerned with the nature of desire, and the way that pleasure functions in relation to the taboo. *Fight Club* can be read as a queer text, with its homoerotic undertones and language of silence and repression. Homoeroticism is another manifestation of Palahniuk's exploration of the taboo and transgressive — Palahniuk is deliberately targeting his more conservative readers, and what is allowed to be included in literature (with a capital 'L'). Chapter Four, *Rape and Pornography*, critiques

concepts of the patriarchy, sexual violence and ideas of female pleasure and desire. The chapter focuses on *Beautiful You*, a novel that functions as the female companion to *Fight Club*. Palahniuk explores the power dynamic of heterosexual relations through the genre of pornography and rape — his protagonist, Penny Harrigan, both subverts and reaffirms women’s implicit disempowerment, as promoted in the genre of pornography. The author even states, in an interview with the *Guardian*: “pornography is the giant thing in the internet age that nobody will talk about.”<sup>25</sup> The power inequalities that exist in pornography are recognizable in modern society – the chapter presents models of misogyny that contribute to the backlash (or regression) against feminism.

It is difficult to come to a firm judgement about Palahniuk and his work with the taboo, as his novels are exploitative and deliberately immature. His novels are playful, in that we see a rejection of the seriousness promoted by high culture. Palahniuk is interested in removing the distinctions between high and low art, and the idea that popular fiction is unable to challenge and promote thought. As Palahniuk himself states in an interview: “the pretentiousness of literature really annoys me... everything I do on tour is to try and destroy that pretence.”<sup>26</sup> His novels are accessible on the level of language, with colloquialism and absurd plot lines – however, Palahniuk’s propensity for the shocking is a deterrent for many readers. In response to his first novel *Invisible Monsters* being rejected multiple times by publishers for being too confronting, Palahniuk submitted *Fight Club* — arguably even more violent and dark than its’ predecessor. Palahniuk’s novels self-consciously address key postmodern concerns such as Jameson’s model of the schizophrenic subject and commodity culture,<sup>ii</sup> and ideas of normalisation and performativity as theorized by critics including Foucault<sup>iii</sup> and Butler.<sup>iv</sup> Although Palahniuk is willfully impertinent, his novels function as a social critique of the imperatives of bourgeoisie modern society. Palahniuk’s novels go

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<sup>25</sup> Cumming, “I’m fascinated by low fiction.”

<sup>26</sup> Chadwick, “The Pride of Chuck Palahniuk.”

beyond shock and disgust, to explore forms of the taboo and non-normative pertaining to desire, sexuality and embodiment.

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<sup>i</sup> Chuck Palahniuk's debut novel *Fight Club* was adapted into film by David Fincher in 1999. The film was produced FOX 2000 Pictures – USA, and starred Brad Pitt, Edward Norton and Helena Bonham-Carter.

<sup>ii</sup> Fredric Jameson, in his essay *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*, suggests that the postmodern subject is fragmented, meaning that there is no unified or cohesive sense of self. Furthermore, the schizophrenic subject is therefore unable to differentiate between self and world, and even his place in time. This is true of Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club*, whereby the unnamed protagonist has no sense of self or agency, and thereby creates an alter ego in order to resolve internal conflicts.

<sup>iii</sup> French philosopher Michel Foucault was interested in theories of normalisation, power and the creation of the subject. Foucault argued that we are all produced, and validated, in relation to normalcy: "If suffering, as we have seen, is the experience of the subject who deviates from the norm, this subject is the result of modes of subjectification that are aimed at normalisation." Those that exist outside of the norm make up Kristeva's notion of the other – as a figure that inspires repugnance and ultimate rejection. These theories are crucial to my discussion of embodiment and difference.

<sup>iv</sup> Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, argues that "sex is to nature as gender is to culture" — gender is culturally constructed, performative and therefore in a constant state of flux. She believes that gender does not preexist our understanding of gendered acts. Palahniuk's novels engage with issues of gender and identity, such as *Invisible Monsters Remix*. One protagonist of the novel, Shane, questions the fixed nature of identity, and attempts to undermine normativity in regards to gender, as evident in his status as a transgender male. His desire to subvert expectations and opt out of labels supports Butler's theories: that there are more than two, binary genders.

## Chapter One: Disgust and Shock

Palahniuk's fiction is perverse, confronting and dark. The author is conscious of "literature's power to disturb" and entertain, as his fiction promotes a visceral reaction from the reader.<sup>27</sup>

Palahniuk explores the role of affect in literature, and the ways in which he is able to elicit responses of disgust and shock. I argue that disgust and shock are key responses to the sexual taboo, deformity, graphic violence and the transgressive, in the manner in which they are depicted in Palahniuk's fiction.

Palahniuk's fiction draws on the gothic tradition in terms of its preoccupation with terror, repression, as well as the "bizarre, eccentric, savage, lawless and transgressive."<sup>28</sup> Palahniuk's novels, however, do not present the supernatural as the source of terror and the bizarre, but rather the human, particularly the breakdown and decay of the body and otherness. The author utilises the genre's predisposition for the dramatic and absurd, with excessive characters and shocking plot. Whereas the gothic promotes suspense and rising anticipation, Palahniuk prioritises shock and disgust.<sup>29</sup> Fred Botting, in his novel *Gothic*, states: "Gothic texts are not good in moral, aesthetic, or social terms. Their concern is with vice: protagonists are selfish or evil; adventures involve decadence or crime."<sup>30</sup> Palahniuk does not establish his characters as villains, but rather, as anti-heroes – we are made privy to the full extent of their humanity. Although Palahniuk's novels are devoid of most of the tropes of the Gothic genre, I argue that Palahniuk has appropriated the genre to fit within a contemporary setting.

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<sup>27</sup> Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 107.

<sup>28</sup> Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Botting, *Gothic*, 5-6.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



## Shock

Shock accounts for the sudden, physiological and autonomic reaction to certain stimuli. In film, shock represents the “most blunt, albeit effective, of cinematic scare devices,” for example, the classic rising tension and jump scare.<sup>31</sup> The mechanism of shock acts as a defence against threat, much like disgust in terms of a visceral reaction. Unlike disgust, as will be discussed later in this chapter, shock is not culturally prescribed by bodily and automatic in nature. According to Felski, “shock, then, names a reaction to what is startling.”<sup>32</sup> The methods of shock are well known to authors and directors alike — that is, the subversion of expectations, and attempts to alienate readers by rupturing familiar frames of reference. It is much more difficult to shock with the written word — in film, it is easier to appeal to and overwhelm the senses, because film is a multidimensional, multi-sensory medium.

Palahniuk’s novels do not necessarily frighten readers, in the traditional sense of screaming and covering one’s face. Although people have fainted at his public readings, his novels are shocking because they invoke images that are arresting, in his usual politically incorrect fashion. His novel *Invisible Monsters Remix* presents a number of social taboos that are shocking to modern audiences. Palahniuk presents incest as another instance of cultural prohibition that would shock readers, considered to be “the only universal taboo”<sup>33</sup>: “My brother wants to marry me.”<sup>34</sup> It is presented abruptly and in a matter of fact manner, without judgement or explanation. The scene witnesses Shane (or Brandy, his female identity), Shannon’s brother, speaking about his transition from a man into a woman: “Brandy’s ring-beaded hands open to full flower and spread the fabric of her skirt across her front. ‘I still have all my original equipment,’ she says. The big hands are still patting and smoothing

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<sup>31</sup> Jones, “Shock Horror,” 103.

<sup>32</sup> Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 108.

<sup>33</sup> Fershtman, Gneezy and Hoffman, “Taboos and Identity,” 140.

<sup>34</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters Remix*, 108.

Brandy's crotch as she turns sideways to the mirror and looks at her profile."<sup>35</sup> Palahniuk does not withhold explicit reference to the act of intercourse between siblings, but fully engages with the perversity of the taboo. The author, by doing so, undermines the unspeakable nature of the taboo, and brings it into the forefront of the public conscious.

Palahniuk's novels follow "a strategy of escalation, piling up one outrage after another."<sup>36</sup> This again ties into his public perception as a mere shock jock, utilising sensationalism in order to engage and horrify his audience. The film franchise *The Human Centipede* (2009), directed by Tom Six, works in much the same way — the premise being the creation of a single being, each person connected by mouth to anus, with one shared digestive system. Each film of the franchise goes further than the last, the second film shot in black and white in order to possibly tone down the graphic nature of blood and faecal matter: "What would be worse than a surgeon making a human centipede?' That would be somebody who doesn't have medical skills making a human centipede."<sup>37</sup> *The Human Centipede* most definitely disgusts through a reliance on body horror and gratuitous images of blood and faeces, but it is shocking because of the utter perversion of the creature itself. Palahniuk, as stated above, is not afraid to fully outline the unspeakable and horrific, in much the same way as *The Human Centipede*. Palahniuk's novel *Haunted* explores the underbelly of humanity, at its' most depraved and ruthless: "It takes all our energy to repeat our story to each other: How Mrs. Clark ripped the unborn baby from Miss America and stewed it in front of its dying mother. How Mr Whittier wrestled the Matchmaker to the floor and hacked off his penis."<sup>38</sup> Palahniuk explores our atavistic nature, by revealing the fragility of the veneer of civilisation.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>36</sup> Upchurch, "Chuck Palahniuk: Trying too hard."

<sup>37</sup> Chapman, "Tom Six explains."

<sup>38</sup> Palahniuk, *Haunted*, 377.

Whilst *The Human Centipede* is devoid of humour altogether, Palahniuk uses humour to further engage his audience. Humour plays a large role in ameliorating the moral weight of the ideas and scenarios Palahniuk uses to represent and/or elicit disgust. Palahniuk holds the reader in a double bind of sorts that complicates the readers' response to his work - that is, "have them wavering between repulsion and release, and between horror and humour."<sup>39</sup> The use of humour supplies a release of sorts and, as Eschenbaum and Correll observe, comedy neutralises "the potential threat of disgust."<sup>40</sup> However, Palahniuk's novels employ a kind of radical comedy that coerces the reader into an uncomfortable proximity to, and complicity in, the disgusting. As O'Neill argues, "laughter is not always pleasant... [and] comedy is not always safe", and this is very much the case with the work of Palahniuk.<sup>41</sup>

Palahniuk employs dark humour, "variously grotesque..., macabre, sick, pornographic... [and] absurd," that sooner evokes horror, even guilt, rather than mirth and outright laughter.<sup>42</sup> According to O'Neill, comedy "laughs at the 'blacker' sides of life..., at grief, despair, evil..., rape, murder... mutilation, or insanity."<sup>43</sup> Offensive humour often highlights the complexities of what we find funny. Palahniuk himself states, in regards to his most recent novel *Adjustment Day* (2019): "what I've penned is a searing indictment of our politically charged times — but with a couple laughs to offer the reader respite from the constant stomping of boots on the human face, forever."<sup>44</sup> Although Palahniuk's novel *Haunted* witnesses its' characters engage in cannibalism and mutilation, practices that are taboo, the way in which Palahniuk presents such content is invariably comic. The following line, taken from the final stages of the novel, sees the Missing Link, an animal/man hybrid whose story is detailed in the short story 'Dissertation,' forcibly consume a human phallus:

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<sup>39</sup> Akbar, "Chuck Palahniuk: I Shy Away."

<sup>40</sup> Eschenbaum and Correll, *Disgust in Early Modern Literature*, 58.

<sup>41</sup> O'Neill, *The Comedy of Entropy*, 149.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>44</sup> Rugh, "'Separatists of Every Stripe.'"

“Holding his arm straight up, he drops the fleshy blob down his tongue. Past his teeth, whole, he swallows. He swallows again and his eyes bulge.”<sup>45</sup> The phallus is made comical, as the scene conjures up images of sword swallows in circus performances and even the act of fellatio. Although the above scene is, on first reading, reminiscent of a crude, laddish joke, it could also be read as a perverse play on the idea of phallogentrism. That is, although the phallus is, quite comically, made central, its’ precedence is eventually subverted (by its’ literal consumption). The consumption of the phallus explores the disempowerment and emasculation of the original owner: “The Missing Link — the last link on that food chain.”<sup>46</sup> Palahniuk is aware of comedy’s power beyond mere entertainment value, as he explores issues of masculinity and phallogentrism.

The theory of incongruity is a form of humour that is derived from the unexpected, with some degree of absurdity and illogicality. Incongruity, and the incongruous, is unsettling, in that it disrupts expectation. This is evidenced in Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1988) — specifically, the home invasion scene, possibly one of the most confronting scenes in the film. The murder of an upper-class couple in their home is set to the track *Singing in the Rain* — the scene is made no less gruesome by what could be considered comic, simply because it is out of place, but rather confirms the assertion that comedy is not always comfortable. Humour is hostile, even aggressive: “laughter feels good..., but the pleasure is mixed with malice towards those being laughed at.”<sup>47</sup> Kubrick has broken a social rule: that rape and humour are incongruous, and should not exist on the same plane. As Kilgour says of humour and violence, Palahniuk refuses “to treat what one might regard as tragic materials tragically.”<sup>48</sup> Palahniuk utilises humour not only as a successful method of shocking his readers, but because the comic is “the only remaining approach that is

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<sup>45</sup> Palahniuk, *Haunted*, 359.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 360.

<sup>47</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 4.

<sup>48</sup> Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*, 148.

artistically acceptable.”<sup>49</sup> The following scene, taken from the short story *Guts*, is only made somewhat tolerable because of its self-reflexive humour. *Guts* witnesses its’ protagonist, Saint Gut-Free, masturbate atop a pool filter, causing his intestines to prolapse: “It’s my large intestine, my colon pulled out of me. What doctors call ‘prolapsed.’”<sup>50</sup> Palahniuk works to distance the reader from the horror taking place, in much the same way the protagonist dissociates himself from his trauma: “This thick rope, some kind of snake, blue-white and braided with veins, has come up out of the pool drain and it’s holding on to my butt.”<sup>51</sup> Although the scene is horrific as the victim himself comments his own trauma, the image portrayed retains none of the realism and pain ordinarily placed at the centre of such a narrative. The nature of the taboo displayed in Palahniuk’s fiction is emptied of any real consequence — *Haunted* explores a world whereby engagement with the taboo and proscribed is celebrated, and worthy of note: “Even the Link knows that eating a dead man’s penis will get him extra prime time exposure on every late-night talk show in the world. Just to describe how it tasted. After that will be the product endorsements for barbecue sauce and ketchup. After that, his own novelty cookbook.”<sup>52</sup> The shocking, sensational and controversial are marketable, and Palahniuk plays upon this fact.

Humour is a means to explore the shocking, especially in dealing with issues of violence and the taboo. Writer and filmmaker Quentin Tarantino presents humour and violence as synergistic, inspired by “spaghetti Westerns, Japanese and Hong Kong gangster flicks, European sex romps [and] American blaxploitation pictures.”<sup>53</sup> Tarantino uses comedic elements, such as parody and hyperbole, to diffuse the brutality of an otherwise opaque crime/gangster narrative. In *Pulp Fiction* (1994), for instance, the audience watches

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<sup>49</sup> O’Neill, *The Comedy of Entropy*, 148.

<sup>50</sup> Palahniuk, *Haunted*, 18.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 359.

<sup>53</sup> Podhoretz, “Black comedy.”

gangster Vincent Vega inadvertently shoot their captive Marvin in the face, followed by the line, “Oh man, I shot Marvin in the face... Chill out man... you probably went over a bump or something.”<sup>54</sup> The scene highlights how comfortable the characters are with violence and their moral ambivalence in the face of such carnage (violence is simply business, and therefore outside the realm of morality). The filmmaker “[puts] the audience in the position of having to resolve an apparent contradiction” — although his films are undeniably violent, films such as *Django Unchained* (2012) and *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2019) ultimately function as comedies.<sup>55</sup> O’Neill states, on reading de Sade: “the writings of the Marquis de Sade... owe their effect less to their satire on Enlightenment... than they do to the grotesque energy and almost insane exaggeration... of sexual enormities and perversions.”<sup>56</sup> Palahniuk, similarly, presents instances that incite absolute shock and gratuity. His novel *Invisible Monsters Remix* presents scenes of homosexuality that are crude and border on animalistic: “Ellis is laid out on the drawing room carpet. Ellis’s hands slap Mr. Parker’s big ass, claw at the back of the double breasted jacket... Ellis is slapping and gagging between Mr. Parker’s thick legs.”<sup>57</sup> The ‘otherness’ of homosexuality is reinforced, as Palahniuk represents queerness as violent and vulgar. Any instances of homosexuality are presented through sex: “Evie’s shouting about how she done found her butt-sucking fag-assed new husband face-downed enjoying butt sex with everybody’s favourite old boyfriend in the butler’s pantry. Oh, Ellis.”<sup>58</sup> Like the works of de Sade, in his efforts to consistently shock and disturb, Palahniuk foregrounds the perverse, whether that be homosexuality as socially taboo, or the vulgarity with which he represents sexual acts. The above scene takes advantage of our ‘political correctness’ — the content is less shocking than the way

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<sup>54</sup> Tarantino, *Pulp Fiction*.

<sup>55</sup> Jacobs, ““Pretty... far from okay.””

<sup>56</sup> O’Neill, *Comedy of Entropy*, 150.

<sup>57</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters Remix*, 194.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

Palahniuk uses of derogatory language to refer to Ellis as a homosexual. This again promotes the idea that Palahniuk is not using the taboo to simply shock, but call into question our own preoccupation with political correctness.

In the absence of any comedic relief, the shocking can be played 'straight' - the violence graphic and confronting. The opening scene of Palahniuk's *Beautiful You*, as will be discussed in greater detail in the chapter on rape and pornography, is one of his most confronting — that is, the rape of Penny Harrigan, the female protagonist of one of his most recent novels, in front of a courtroom of men: "Even as Penny was attacked, the judge merely stared. The jury recoiled. The journalists cowered in the gallery. No one in the courtroom came to her rescue. The court reporter continued to dutifully keyboard, transcribing Penny's words: 'Someone, he's hurting me! Please stop him!'"<sup>59</sup> Palahniuk here is critical of the way in which the judicial system handles rape, as the cross examination recalls the terror and powerlessness of the original assault — Penny here is emblematic of all women that are made to endure what is referred to as a "secondary victimisation or the second rape."<sup>60</sup> In Chapter Three, on *Rape and Pornography*, I will examine in more detail the complexities of the court scene in *Beautiful You*, and themes of gender and power/disempowerment in Palahniuk's novels. The reader is immediately made to engage with confronting and uncomfortable violence. As Kent L. Brintnall states: "to make an ethical demand, violence cannot be fantastic; theatrical, cartoonish violence is too easily deflected and dismissed."<sup>61</sup> The above scene retains none of the comedy that is usually employed by Palahniuk, as he represents the rape with bleak realism that makes it all the more disturbing.

Pauline Kael, on her analysis of *A Clockwork Orange* criticised the film for its depiction of rape as titillating, and the apathy with which scenes of 'beatings' were

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<sup>59</sup> Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*, 1.

<sup>60</sup> McCarthy-Jones, "Survivors of sexual violence."

<sup>61</sup> Brintnall, "Tarantino's Incantational Theology," 72.

represented. Kael fears that writers and filmmakers, in this case Stanley Kubrick, desensitise their audiences to brutality, and depict violence simply for the sake of it — “Kubrick can't wait for Alex to arrive, because then he couldn't show us as much. That girl is stripped for our benefit; it's the purest exploitation.”<sup>62</sup> Palahniuk allows his characters to act in a similar form of lawlessness, without fear of castigation. Palahniuk's *Beautiful You* also presents rape with the same apathy and absolute bleakness as Kubrick. The position of the reader is made complicit in the ordeal, another passive observer to her pain and suffering: “Others peeked decorously at their watches or text messages as if mortified on Penny's behalf. As if she ought to know better than to scream and bleed in public. As if this attack and her suffering were her own fault.”<sup>63</sup> This scenario can certainly be read as a commentary on rape culture — the idea that women preemptively provoke the attack themselves, inadvertently assuaging the assailant of blame. Palahniuk forces readers engage with the taboo and the fact of sexual violence.

Bret Easton Ellis, best known as the author of *American Psycho* (1991), is similarly unrestrained in his portrayal of sex and violence. There is much contention surrounding *American Psycho*, criticised for his sensationalistic representation of violence and its stance as anti-feminist. The subject of violence becomes all the more troubling when put in the context of pleasure and eroticism. The above rape scene similarly speaks to the moral ambiguity of violence and pleasure, as the courtroom scene borders on voyeurism, as evident in the quote noted above. This further shocks and troubles the reader, who is made to empathise with the protagonist, Penny. Norman Mailer, his article in *Vanity Fair*, claimed that the issue with *American Psycho* lay with its moral ambiguity, not its gruesome content; Ellis's novel deals with violence with detachment, boredom and emotional reserve.<sup>64</sup> The rest

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<sup>62</sup> Kael, “Stanley Strangelove,” 53.

<sup>63</sup> Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*, 2.

<sup>64</sup> Sipchen, “Weighing the Merits”



of the novel centres around banal talk about fashion, working out and the contents of his home: “In the early light of a May dawn this is what the living room of my apartment looks like: Over the white marble and granite gas-log fireplace hangs an original David Onica. It’s a six-foot-by-four-foot portrait of a naked woman, mostly done in muted greys and olives.”<sup>65</sup> The novel, much like the works of Tarantino, is more concerned with scenes of sexual and physical violence. Eldridge, in his discussion of the aesthetics of language, highlights “that the book only ‘comes alive’ when Bateman murders someone.”<sup>66</sup> Violence here diffuses the flat language employed throughout the rest of the text. The novel here mirrors the emotional internal world of Bateman, whose only source of satisfaction, being otherwise emasculated, comes from assaulting and murdering the women that metaphorically castrate him. The following scene presents Bateman attempting to impress two prostitutes he invites home, and, when finding their reaction lacking, punishing the girls:

“‘So,’ I start, crossing my legs. ‘Don’t you want to know what I do?’

The two of them stare at me for a long time... before Christie, unsure, shrugs and quietly answers, ‘No.’

... I stare at the two of them for a minute before recrossing my legs and sighing, very irritated. ‘Well, I work on Wall Street. At Pierce & Pierce.’

... An hour later I will impatiently lead them to the door, both of them dressed and sobbing, bleeding but well paid. Tomorrow Sabrina will have a limp. Christie will probably have a terrible black eye and deep scratches across her buttocks.”<sup>67</sup>

Although the entire novel is detail-oriented, the scenes of violence are more fast-paced and action packed, as opposed to merely describing what Bateman sees, as evident with the cataloguing of his belongings. As Bateman’s enjoyment of the violence is mirrored

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<sup>65</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 23-4.

<sup>66</sup> Eldridge, “The Generic American Psycho,” 230.

<sup>67</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 168-9.

in the pace of the novel, the reader also anticipates the next scene of violence and taboo. The very act of engaging with novels such as *American Psycho* and *Guts* “illustrates the... ‘perverse pleasure’ gained from confronting ‘sickening, horrific images,’” even if only to forcibly eject feelings of disgust thereafter (through nausea and even fainting).<sup>68</sup> Palahniuk has documented, on his website *The Cult*, 73 occurrences of people fainting during his public readings. The reader is “seduced by what s/he cannot comprehend, define, or completely separate from his or her selfhood,” positioned at a safe distance from the grotesque or vulgar.<sup>69</sup> Ellis, in much the same vein as Palahniuk, critiques the current desire for excessive violence and the taboo, by engaging in precisely those things.

Shock, I believe, is autonomic, and evokes a visceral response from the reader. Palahniuk promotes shock in the reader by engaging with the taboo and horrific with uncomfortable humour or, on occasion, bleak realism. Palahniuk’s novels provoke readers to question their desire for the perverse and violent, and, at times, push the reader to the limit of what they can bear and assimilate. That said, Palahniuk’s novels function as more than juvenile, low-brow entertainment: they alert the reader to the moral ambiguity of laughter and the violence of contemporary society and popular culture, and critique the underpinnings of political correctness.

## **Disgust**

Disgust, at its core, is an emotion - extreme, demonstrative and, at times, condemning.

Disgust, if understood to be conceptual and not instinctive (like shock), is based on a belief that certain objects and even people are disgusting. It is furthermore intrinsically judgmental, in that it “evaluates (negatively) what it touches.”<sup>70</sup> Disgust sets up “hierarchies of value” —

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<sup>68</sup>Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, 10.

<sup>69</sup> Moore, “We’re not done yet.” 224.

<sup>70</sup> Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 9.

the very experience of disgust itself seems to justify any moral condemnation.<sup>71</sup> Any feelings of disgust here arises because of some divergence from our own beliefs and values.

McGinn, in the *Meaning of Disgust*, asks: “what is it to be disgusting?”<sup>72</sup> According to Maura Flannery, in her study of the biology of aesthetics: “some attributes are inherently more pleasing than others, that there may indeed be a biological basis to the aesthetic experience.”<sup>73</sup> Although disgust often arises from a fear of contamination, that is, disease avoidance, a great deal of what Darwin perceived as ‘disgusting,’ in his account of his time in South America (written in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, 1872), had nothing to do with disease or literal contamination. It was rather his contempt in meeting, and interacting with, the offensive “naked savage” who existed outside normative frames of reference.<sup>74</sup> The savage is made into the other, a figure that threatens the idea of man as civilised — the savage is a figure of disgust, because he “strays on the territories of animal” and the unclean.<sup>75</sup> Here disgust is based on ideology – Darwin’s perception of the racial other. Palahniuk questions such attitudes toward non-normativity and difference, creating characters that exist on the fringes of society, for being deformed, ugly or hybridised (identifying as both male and female, old and young, and, as stated above, sub-human and animal).

As Miller states, “it is culture, not nature, that draws the lines between defilement and purity, clean and filthy.”<sup>76</sup> Disgust and the disgusting no longer account only for the avoidance of disease and toxins, but social and moral attitudes. According to Angyal, there is nothing intrinsically ‘dangerous’ about contact with some objects of disgust – rather, contact with the disgusting is “degrading rather than harmful.”<sup>77</sup> These objects of disgust, once

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<sup>71</sup> Korsmeyer & Smith, “Visceral Values,” 1.

<sup>72</sup> McGinn, *Meaning of Disgust*, 33.

<sup>73</sup> Flannery, “Biology, Aesthetics & the Friends I’ve made,” 315.

<sup>74</sup> Darwin, “Distain, Contempt, Disgust,” 257.

<sup>75</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 12.

<sup>76</sup> Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 15.

<sup>77</sup> Angyal, “Disgust and related aversions,” 397.

devoid of any negative connotation, such as taboo sex, now “function in the category of the forbidden and shameful.”<sup>78</sup> Disgust is therefore socially determined, a reflection of social sentiment, and therefore not politically neutral.

Giublini, in an article on moral disgust, considers whether disgust functions as “a consequence of moral evaluations or ... a moralising emotion.”<sup>79</sup> The actual manifestation of disgust acts as a reliable indicator of the limits of taste and tolerance. Disgust, according to Ngai, signifies the “absolute ‘other’ of the system of taste,” the recognition that there is some sort of binary (normal and abnormal, beauty and ugliness, moral and immoral), always at play.<sup>80</sup> Palahniuk’s characters are models of disgust, because they do not fit into existing categories, in turn, establishing them as outsiders. The author questions the validity of such judgements, by creating characters of real sympathy and undermining the assumptions that give rise to stereotypes. This is similar to what Tod Browning does in his 1932 film *Freaks*, which overrides the silence surrounding deformity, and gives these people a real voice: “Browning... was concerned not to make his strange performers objects of horror or pity but to show them in such a matter-of-fact manner.”<sup>81</sup> Palahniuk takes readers to the extremes of disgust and shock, and then reveals something of their character beyond their deformity. By doing so, we question the nature of otherness. As will be introduced in the chapter on embodiment and monstrosity, the Missing Link is a character that is considered to be a hybrid of animal and man, living on the Chewlah reservation, a tribe of American Indians. In the story ‘Dissertation,’ the Link is seen to be on a date with Mandy, a human. This scenario is confronting, and potentially disgusting to many, because of the connotations of bestiality and its oblique allusion to mixed race relationships. The scene draws on the racial stereotype of the wild ethnic other, as Mandy makes references to the Link’s inherently violent nature:

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 405.

<sup>79</sup> Giublini, “What in the World Is Moral Disgust?”, 227.

<sup>80</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 274.

<sup>81</sup> Malcolm, “Tod Browning: Freaks.”

“Did you hear about that little girl getting killed?... Wasn’t she from the reservation?”<sup>82</sup>

Palahniuk, in the following quote, suggests that it is only because of human’s superiority complex to that of animals that we refuse to act on our more primal instincts: “‘Maybe that’s how the folks at the Villa Diodati kept from killing each other, all those rainy days, trapped indoors’... By having their big collection of dogs and cats and horses and monkeys, to make them behave like human beings.”<sup>83</sup> The novel has created a distinction, whether it be biologically justified or not, between animals and humans. Ultimately, the novel concludes that the only real difference between the two is human’s predisposition to wanton cruelty, and, as explored in the character of Mandy, lack of compassion and bestial instinct: “Every day, she’s there. Every day, she says hello. Still, always spying. Her eyes snapping pictures. Jotting down notes.”<sup>84</sup> Palahniuk subverts readers’ disgust of the Link, by shifting the emphasis to Mandy and showing the Link to be a sympathetic character.

The expression of disgust seems to support specific social and cultural prejudices, “because we intuit and feel, immediately and without argument.”<sup>85</sup> Such “judgements of taste aspire to correctness,” even at the expense of all other viewpoints.<sup>86</sup> However, that is not to say that emotion has no role in moral judgement, rather disgust is key in policing issues where, for instance, sexual fantasies “outgrow their proper boundaries and become excessive, perverted.”<sup>87</sup> The act of sex, for instance, in Palahniuk’s novel *Beautiful You*, has become ‘excessive’ and ‘perverted,’ as the sex represented is distasteful and crude. This is most evident in scenes featuring Baba Grey-Beard, a 200-year-old sex witch who teaches Penny in the ways of female sexual empowerment: “To her own surprise, one night Penny brought her mentor to prolonged, strenuous release. Dabbling expertly with her lips and tongue, she

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<sup>82</sup> Palahniuk, *Haunted*, 296.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>85</sup> Kass, *The ethics of human cloning*, 19.

<sup>86</sup> Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Aesthetic Judgement.”

<sup>87</sup> Kolnai, “Visceral Values: Aurel Kolnai on Disgust,” 22.

teased the wily crone to a full pitched fit of fevered yelping. The scrawny sex witch bounced violently atop their bed of twigs. Her toothless gums yammered incoherently.”<sup>88</sup> The act of sex is not inherently disgusting, but the image of a young woman being made to perform oral sex on an old woman is discomforting. Palahniuk is parodying the trope of the cougar, where older, attractive, physically fit women (typically) seduce the likes of younger men or women. Society ordinarily finds such a character humorous, empowering and attractive – however, Palahniuk takes such a trope to its most extreme, by featuring a very old woman in the role of the cougar. In this sense, the image become obscene and disgusting. In Chapter Four, *Rape and Pornography*, I will return in more detail to this character in relation to the themes of desire, sexuality and violence.

Important to the concept of disgust is paraphilia — those desires that fall outside the ‘norm.’ Sinwell states, on redefining paraphilia, that perversion “has often connoted anything ‘dirty,’ ‘unnatural’, or ‘abnormal,’ particularly but not exclusively related to sex.”<sup>89</sup> Andras Angyal, an American psychiatrist, explores the nature of disgust and taboo in an account of a Zuni festival in New Mexico: “I was a spectator of an orgy at the Zuni pueblo in New Mexico... One of the Indians brought into the plaza the excrement to be employed, and it was passed from hand to hand and eaten... They drank urine from a large shallow bowl... At last one of those taking part was made sick, and vomited after the ceremony was over.”<sup>90</sup> For those that have not been brought up in the pueblo culture, they would apply their own values and norms to the situation, and find the act disgusting. The Zuni tribe may not find the act disgusting however, and the act of vomiting is separate to feelings of disgust. Palahniuk similarly deals with sexual practice and sexual proclivities: “I remember all his porno magazines, and all the details of anal, oral, rimming, fisting, felching.”<sup>91</sup> Although these

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<sup>88</sup> Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*, 158

<sup>89</sup> Sinwell, “Mapping the (Adolescent) Male Body,” 143.

<sup>90</sup> Angyal, “Disgust and related aversions,” 400.

<sup>91</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters Remix*, 138-9.

practices are not inherently disgusting, they exist outside mainstream knowledge and are therefore potentially confronting to some.

In terms of Palahniuk's readers, much like the participants of the orgy in New Mexico, their engagement with, and desire for, such explicit material is "very much like a boast of what one is able to do."<sup>92</sup> Palahniuk, through his novels, engages with the question: "what... do we do with the desires we cannot bear, the desires we or the society around us strain to restrict or strangle...?"<sup>93</sup> Palahniuk attempts to "pin down, or completely explain, the other side of desire."<sup>94</sup> Palahniuk's novels present the taboo as a way of expressing repressed desires, and living without limits. Blechner, in his commentary of Muriel Dimen, a key figure in psychoanalysis, states that both "shock and disgust are just a short distance from fascination."<sup>95</sup> Disgust specifically "attacks the very... disinterestedness (and indifference) on which it depends."<sup>96</sup> The object of disgust elicits strong affect, meaning that objects of disgust cannot go unnoticed or ignored. The strange has its own sort of magnetic draw - the disjunction between us and them, 'normophilic' versus paraphiliac, is mystifying, and therefore of real interest (if only at a safe distance).<sup>97</sup> This again lends itself to Palahniuk, who, for the most part, "makes alluring what, for most, is not erotic - the grotesque, the violent, the abject."<sup>98</sup>

The horror genre, especially in film, has seen a shift toward the corporeal, away from a focus on the supernatural as the nexus of fear. Also known as body horror, such focus "represents the most intimate of all fears": that is, those universal fears of death, disease and mutilation.<sup>99</sup> The body is "split open, infested, rendered asunder, penetrated, truncated, cleft,

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<sup>92</sup> Angyal, "Disgust and related aversions," 400.

<sup>93</sup> Bergner, *The Other Side of Desire*, 2.

<sup>94</sup> Moore, "We're not done yet," 239.

<sup>95</sup> Blechner, "Disgust, Desire, and Fascination," 35.

<sup>96</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 273.

<sup>97</sup> Moore, "We're Not Through Yet," 239.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>99</sup> Ramirez, "Deconstructing Body Horror."

sliced, suspended and devoured,” the very locus of fear - that is, the fear of being left physically incomplete, damaged or unrecognisable as human (as a modern monster).<sup>100</sup> The body, as the nexus of disgust, sees the ultimate collapse of distance and the desire, but inability, to reinstate boundaries. However, it is not just an issue of physical proximity, but also the familiarity that accompanies such fear. Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror*, predicates the abject on the breakdown of subject and object, the self and disgust. Freud similarly writes, in his essay *The Uncanny*, that “the uncanny is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar.”<sup>101</sup> Palahniuk’s most notable engagement with the realm of body horror is seen in his short story titled *Guts*, as referred to earlier. The protagonist of *Guts* is presented, if only imagined, inside out, an image that is both familiar but unfamiliar: “what my parents will find after work is a big naked fetus, curled in on itself.”<sup>102</sup> Palahniuk here exploits the fear of one’s own body: the threat no longer comes from the outside but from within.<sup>103</sup> The author also fragments the body, reducing the body to flesh and removing it from any subjective experience: “The big problem is, we’re all connected together inside. Your ass is just the far end of your mouth.”<sup>104</sup> Palahniuk, by reducing the body to, again, mere flesh and speaking to a collective ‘we,’ promotes the idea that everyone is made of the same matter, and the notion of difference is just a social construct.

A number of societies engage in body modification that is not necessarily dangerous or even permanent, such as scarification and intense body piercing. However, in its’ extreme form, it is confronting, and challenges some people’s view about what the body should look like. This could be seen as a form of body horror, at least according to Western standards and

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<sup>100</sup> McRoy, “Simulating Torture,” 138.

<sup>101</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 1.

<sup>102</sup> Palahniuk, *Haunted*, 19.

<sup>103</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1.

<sup>104</sup> Palahniuk, *Haunted*, 18.



sensibilities. The presence of body modification is marginalised and has negative connotations, such as fringe and criminal associations. In Japan, for instance, tattoos allude to the yakuza lifestyle. In Palahniuk's fiction, Brandy Alexander, a transgender subject and one of the main protagonists of *Invisible Monsters Remix*, undergoes surgery in order to become, at least outwardly, more feminine. Although the above body modification, that is, "the scalp advancement, the brow lift, the brow bone shave. We've done the trachea shave, the nose contouring, the jawline contouring, the forehead realignment," retains none of the feelings of trauma and suffering as experienced by Saint Gut-Free, it too can be seen as a sort of (self) mutilation.<sup>105</sup> The reader is disgusted by the process and surgery Brandy has had to experience to achieve such a look: "These strips of warm skin flapping around your neck are good, blood-fed, living tissue. The surgeon lifts each strip and attaches the healed end to your face... They pull all the loose skin up and bunch it into the rough shape of a jaw."<sup>106</sup> Although plastic surgery can be seen as self enhancement, to create the image of the perfect body, it does involve cutting, which alludes to self-harm. Within Palahniuk's fiction, body modification functions as an act of resistance — for Brandy, she wants to subvert normative beauty standards, by distorting the standard and becoming a 'monster' of excess: "Brandy Alexander, she stands up on her gold lame leg-hold trap shoes. The queen supreme takes a jewelled compact out of her clutch bag... The big jewelled arm muscles of Brandy sit me down."<sup>107</sup> The body here becomes the nexus of difference, as will be explained further in the chapter on embodiment and monstrosity. Brandy effectively rejects a society, and people, that fails to accept her, because of her connection to the taboo. Palahniuk is not presenting the taboo, that is, body modification and excess, to simply shock, but criticise the idea that the body should be subject to scrutiny and judgement.

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<sup>105</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters Remix*, 207

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

Disgust, therefore, has been attributed emotional and cultural explanations. However, there are objects that are fundamentally disgusting, even cross-culturally, including incest, rape and bestiality. Palahniuk himself explores different manifestations of disgust in his novels, through body horror, paraphilia and models of otherness. The taboos Palahniuk explores are radicalised and excessive. While eating beef can be considered a taboo in some cultures for ethical or religious reasons, Palahniuk presents taboos that go beyond social norms, and move into the repugnant. By doing so, Palahniuk is able to disgust the reader, because these taboos are so inherently condemned. However, as we can see, Palahniuk is critical of the oppressive nature of taboos, and people's propensity to align otherness, whether that be racial or deformity, with taboos.

## Chapter Two: Monstrosity and Embodiment

In the previous chapter, I outline the ways in which Palahniuk's literature functions to shock and disgust readers. Palahniuk's novels, especially *Haunted*, explore difference and the non-normative as represented on the body. Palahniuk's characters are conspicuous, as they are physically deformed and, at times, more aligned with the animal (physical attributes and temperament). Palahniuk's exploration of the body does not simply function to disgust and shock readers but make us rethink our attitudes toward models of difference and the human.

Palahniuk does not allow deformity and disability to define his characters, but explores their motivations and intentions beyond their monstrous appearance. The normative, as represented in Palahniuk's novels, is not necessarily something that characters strive toward, but rather revolt against. Palahniuk's characters resist expectations of normativity because it limits an authentic expression of identity.

### **The Animal and Freak Show Narrative**

Palahniuk's work investigates the status of the human, and what it means to be human. Palahniuk presents characters that exhibit traits that set them apart from the norm, such as physical deformity, much like those seen in traditional freak shows. The institution of the freak show similarly exploits the abnormalities of the performers, as they are put on display for show. Durbach's *Spectacle of Deformity* discusses the significance of the rise of the freak show, and introduces some of the 'freaks,' both well-known and obscure. Although freak shows have existed since the medieval period, the resurgence in interest occurred in the early nineteenth-century in both the United States and, following such a turn in popularity, the United Kingdom. During this time, the novelty of freaks garnered "a larger viewing public

willing to pay for the opportunity to witness human medical oddities.”<sup>108</sup> That said, not all performers were born with deformities — some of the ‘freaks’ entertained audiences with unusual talents, such as sword-swallowing and acrobatics. To participate in freak shows invariably marked one as abnormal: “‘freak’ is a particularly ugly word... because it also implies that they are but objects of fear and horror.”<sup>109</sup> The freak show housed those that did not fit comfortably within categories of the normative and stable. The shows became forms of popular entertainment, as people became objects for exhibition (as human curiosities). The freaks were staged in what is best described as museums, named ‘Cabinets of Curiosities,’ whereby performers were put on display alongside unusual historical artefacts. Two notable ‘freaks’ were the Elephant Man and Krao, two figures with congenital abnormalities that confused boundaries between the human and animal. These people, Krao in particular, became the model for some of Palahniuk’s characters, as portrayed in his novel *Haunted*.

The performers were soon met with sympathy rather than disdain, possibly marking the decline of the freak show by the twentieth-century. Hoo Loo, a Chinese man with a 56-pound tumour on his scrotum, “came to symbolise both the limits of Western medicine while also representing the... acceptance of the patient (or freak) through empathy.”<sup>110</sup> Hoo Loo was brought to London in the mid nineteenth-century for a medical procedure, attracting a great deal of attention. It was a case of how sentimentality punctured the “otherwise objective medical [narrative].”<sup>111</sup> The pejorative use of the term ‘freak’ was called into question by members of the audience — the freak show was considered to be the lowest form of entertainment, as it exhibited human degradation for amusement. Henry Mayhew, a British social historian and journalist, wrote: “instead of being a means for illustrating a moral

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<sup>108</sup> Things Said and Done, “Strange and Bizarre.”

<sup>109</sup> Sherman, “‘Freak’ is a slur.”

<sup>110</sup> Things Said and Done, “Strange and Bizarre.”

<sup>111</sup> Burke and Thompson-Gillis, “Victorian Freaks,” 13.

precept, it turned into a platform to teach the cruelest debauchery.”<sup>112</sup> As seen in Palahniuk’s novels, the history of freak shows continues to inspire narratives that champion difference and diversity. Palahniuk explores physical deformity as a way to disgust and shock readers, but also critique reader’s attitudes toward difference.

Durbach, in her study of freaks, highlights how the performers eccentricities were accentuated to promote their apparent otherness. Krao, a seven year old performer in nineteenth-century freak shows across the United Kingdom, becomes the foundation of Palahniuk’s exploration of the freak show identity, as she herself was constructed as a hybrid of man and monkey: “in order to accentuate Krao’s status as the missing link, Farini underscored her Simian characteristics: her nose was level with the rest of her face... she shot out her lip like a chimpanzee when pouty,... she had the rudiments of a tail.”<sup>113</sup> Krao’s body denotes her character — she is nothing more than what her body can project, in this case, her identity is entirely tied up in her Simian qualities. In regards to Palahniuk’s *Haunted*, Saint Gut-Free’s skeletal frame is highlighted in order to promote his hybridity, that is, existing in the space between life and death: “Saint Gut-Free onstage, his arms folded across his chest — so skinny his hands can touch in the middle of his back... with a single coat of skin painted on his skeleton.”<sup>114</sup> The trauma that he experienced as a child will forever be evident on his body. The Missing Link’s masculine and somewhat disturbing facial features contribute to his perception as crude and barbaric: “Between this clump of black curls and their bristly sack of low-hanging chin, there’s that Chewlah nose... A nose so thick and half hard, the fat head of it hides their mouth.”<sup>115</sup> Palahniuk is obviously alluding to male genitalia, again pointing toward his Neanderthal origins and wild character: “in the second half of the nineteenth-century the ‘wild man’ character at the sideshow was generally portrayed as an

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<sup>112</sup> Things Said and Done, “Strange and Bizarre.”

<sup>113</sup> Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*, 93.

<sup>114</sup> Palahniuk, *Haunted*, 9.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

African.”<sup>116</sup> Even Mr Whittier, from the short story *Dog Years*, accentuates his age, which almost acts as a metaphor for his duplicitous personality: “Always, for Mr Whittier, the spotted, bald old man at the end of the hall, they say: What a nice black-light, butt-rock concert posters he has taped above his bed. What a colourful skateboard he has propped beside the door.”<sup>117</sup> Mr Whittier is a young man of eighteen trapped in an old man’s body; even his name, Mr Whittier alludes to his body’s rapid ageing, whilst Brandon, his first name, is suggestive of his youth. Palahniuk reduces his characters to their most basic attributes, as representative of stereotypes. However, I believe that Palahniuk promotes a more holistic rendering of his characters, as they show real depth, as will be discussed below.

Palahniuk, in his novel *Haunted*, recalls the history of the freak show, and sets up similar instances of difference. The character of ‘the Missing Link,’ is presented, like Krao, as a model of animal meets human: “There the man we called ‘the Missing Link’ stepped out of the bushes near the curb. Balled in his arms, he carried a black garbage bag, torn and leaking plaid flannel shirts.”<sup>118</sup> The story *Dissertation* featuring the Link centres around a member of the Chewlah tribe, an American Indian community to which the Link belongs, who purport they can transform into sasquatches — large, hairy humanoid figures that reside in dense forest. Much like Krao, the narrator’s own hybridity brings into question notions of the human — Sasquatches, similar to that of Big Foot, are again “the last surviving link between modern man and our evolutionary past.”<sup>119</sup> Although Palahniuk immediately presents the character as primitive, promoted by the image of him “[stepping] out of the bushes,” he does not, however, represent the supposed monster as backward and crude — the short story begins with the narrator being critically interrogated by Mandy, a reporter for

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<sup>116</sup> Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*, 150.

<sup>117</sup> Palahniuk, *Haunted*, 112.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>119</sup> “Sasquatch”

*Today*<sup>120</sup>. It appears that Mandy is intent on constructing the Link in the image of a monster: “‘Those eyebrows hide their eyes,’ Mandy says. ‘The nose hides their mouth.’”<sup>121</sup> Mandy, by maintaining that Sasquatches purportedly reside in reservations, aligns representations of primitiveness with race and ethnicity. The Link, and his people by extension, are depicted as overly violent, unstable and morally ambiguous: “‘Did you hear about that little girl getting killed?’ she says. ‘Wasn’t she from the reservation?’”<sup>122</sup> However, as Mandy alludes to the violence and primitive appearance of the Link’s tribe and people, he responds to her line of inquiry with humour and irony: “‘what looks like a monster to the world,’ Mandy says, ‘it’s just home movies to the Chewlah tribe,’” to which the Link replies, “‘Because every lumbering hairy monster, worldwide, is related.’”<sup>123</sup> Palahniuk here subverts the notion of the ‘uneducated savage,’ by depicting the Link as wiser than the apparently civilised comparison. The Link is obviously well aware of the opinions expressed by people like Mandy, and plays into such a stereotype (by insinuating that she will be the treat): “‘she says, ‘You want to get a bite?’ Her treat.’”<sup>124</sup> Humour is a uniquely human trait, again reaffirming the Link’s status as a self-aware subject. Although Palahniuk initially poses the Missing Link to shock and disgust readers, with his crude appearance and violent behaviour, he turns the line of argument on its head, instead criticising Mandy for being arrogant and impudent. As stated above, Palahniuk is undermining the assumptions that give rise to stereotypes.

Cronenberg, as the originator of the body horror genre in film, further explores animal/human hybridity in the language of body horror. His films expose bodily mutilation as one of our deepest and most primal fears. *The Fly* (1986), potentially his best known work, sees Seth Brundle, the main protagonist, unmade and remade, transformed to the point of

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<sup>120</sup> Palahniuk, *Haunted*, 5.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 302-3.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

being unrecognisable — Brundle unknowingly merges his own body with that of a housefly, as he tests a home-made teleportation device. His body not only undergoes physical change, as he loses human traits and exists somewhere between human and insect, but he also adopts the behaviour of a fly, with acidic vomit and characteristic twitching. However, even as *The Fly* disgusts and shocks audiences with Brundle’s physical deformity and insect-like behaviour, it deals with issues pertaining to mortality, the nature of humanity, and even the AIDs epidemic. As the film premiered in the 1980s, at the height of the AIDs outbreak, the film pays particular attention to fears of ageing, disease, and the inevitability of deterioration. Flies are always associated with decay and disease – Brundle is a figure of the disgusting, because he conjures up fear of contamination and that we too will transform into something ‘grotesque.’ The film ends with Brundles’s death, as his body completely collapses in on itself. The following quote highlights Brundle’s fear of the more non-human part of his hybridity taking over, and the dread of losing control completely: “I’m saying I’m an insect who dreamt he was a man and loved it. But now the dream is over and the insect is awake.”<sup>125</sup> Palahniuk also acknowledges, as will be discussed below, that people that don’t fit into one fixed identity will be met with judgment and prejudice. That is, much like Cronenberg’s Seth Brundle, the characters of Palahniuk’s novels work to reinforce how difference is feared and condemned.

Even as his characters engage in the disgusting, Palahniuk does not make judgements on his characters’ behaviour, but attempts to evoke sympathy from his readers. Although the situations are grotesque and hyperbolic, they are also credible. Shane, one of the protagonists of *Invisible Monsters Remix*, endures harsh criticism and judgement, mostly from his parents. Shane becomes the victim of molestation, later found to have contracted gonorrhoea from the whole ordeal: ““That little tiny gonococcus bug. I was sixteen years old and had the clap. My

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<sup>125</sup> Kellner, “David Cronenberg,” 99.



folks did not deal with it well.”<sup>126</sup> The reference to a bug further aligns Shane with disease and infection, associating him with disgust and threat of contamination. Although homosexuality in 1990s America was considered taboo, Palahniuk undermines such conservative views, by evoking sympathy and prompting the notion that the protagonist is a victim not a threat. Although it is Shane that is initially presented as ‘diseased’ and a failure, shunned and forcibly evicted from home, I believe his parents are presented as the ultimate failures, being ignorant and naive. Palahniuk is advocating for a more progressive attitude toward difference. Even after his death, Shane’s parents are still unable to authentically represent their son’s sexuality. The following scene sees Shane’s parents making an ‘AIDs memorial quilt’ that openly and proudly reveals the sexuality of their son. However, they are more concerned with public appearances: “We just ran into some problems with what to sew on it... I mean we didn’t want to give people the wrong idea... I wanted pink triangles but all the panels have pink triangles.”<sup>127</sup> I argue that Shane’s parents are less interested in representing their son’s sexual identity, than they are creating a largely generic artwork, as a display of tokenism. The hypocrisy of their actions is again brought up earlier in the novel, as they shame their son for the very thing they celebrate in his absence: “‘Drugs,’ my mom said, ‘we could deal with.’... ‘Teenage pregnancy,’ my mom said, ‘we could deal with.’”<sup>128</sup> Homosexuality here is considered to be a worse misdemeanour than drugs and teenage pregnancy. The parents’ actions suggest that although they’re taking some efforts to memorialise Shane, it’s all through the lens of their repugnance – they don’t want to give profile to their homosexual son, as it potentially impacts on them (in their conservative community). Shane’s parents regard him as a freak, and think of their son’s behavior as abhorrent, as seen in the following response: “‘They freaked,’ Brandy says.”<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters Remix*, 78.

<sup>127</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters Remix*, 243-44.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

Palahniuk explores instances of depravity and atrocity, as represented in his novel *Haunted*. He presents people that appear, on their face, abhorrent, but fundamentally finds these people to have value. The characters are locked away in a secluded theatre in order to write stories that will shock and disgust friends and family back home: “This much time, we’d bet on our own ability to create some masterpiece. A short story or poem or screenplay or memoir that would make sense of our life. A masterpiece that would buy our way out of slavery.”<sup>130</sup> In this example, Palahniuk presents people divorced from society, regressing into what we may regard as primitivism. This is evident as we see Miss America forced to eat her stillborn baby — “Her baby was the first course. Miss America will be the main course. Dessert is anybody’s guess.”<sup>131</sup> The above scene recalls early ritual sacrifice, as performed in early societies. However, this behaviour is by design – *Haunted* acts as an extreme microcosm of the pursuit of notoriety at any cost, as seen in mainstream media. The characters in *Haunted* are prepared to engage in cannibalism and murder, in order to achieve such an aim: “Our world of only humans, a world without humanity... how Whittier stabbed Mrs Clark and choked down so much of her thigh he split open.”<sup>132</sup> *Haunted* is reminiscent of reality TV shows such as *Survivor*, where people are similarly prepared to be put into contrived and dangerous situations, in the hope of winning money and fame. Palahniuk himself, on defining transgressive fiction, states: it can be “loosely defined as fiction in which characters misbehave and act badly, commit crimes... or acts of civil disobedience.”<sup>133</sup>

Palahniuk questions the validity of judgements of the taboo, by undermining the assumptions that give rise to stereotypes. Much like the institution of the freak show, the attitudes toward difference have become outdated. Palahniuk clearly has a line between

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<sup>130</sup> Palahniuk, *Haunted*, 8.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 377.

<sup>133</sup> Chaplinsky, Kolsch and Widmyer, *Postcards from the Future*.

behaviours that are a matter of individual choice, and those that clearly impact non-consensual parties.

### **Deformity, Disability and Ugliness**

Deformity and disability play a large role in Palahniuk's exploration of the normative. The body itself has the potential to express modes of difference — the deformed and disabled body, by existing in “the negative space the body must not occupy,” becomes a potential site of oppression, the grotesque or, conversely, invisibility.<sup>134</sup> Deformity, according to Bradshaw in his study of disability in literature, includes “irregularity, disproportion, disharmony, asymmetry, peculiarity, sickness, and decay. Looking at people or objects with deformities causes the viewer to experience pain, disgust, and disappointment.”<sup>135</sup> Palahniuk recognises that deformity is visible to the eye but remains unspeakable — he creates characters that demand to be seen and become identifiable only by their connection to deformity. The bodies depicted in Palahniuk's fiction are degraded, wounded and ugly — Palahniuk revels in the body's ability to transform and mutate. There is a decided absence of beauty in Palahniuk's novels, as characters strive against normative ideals of beauty, and the social demand to ‘fit in.’

Palahniuk goes as far as to suggest that ugliness, at least in *Haunted*, is a form of deformity — the author has taken what is conventional to the extreme, into a form that many would regard as ugly. The characters of Palahniuk's various novels are either subjects of deformity or suffer because of their beauty. The eighth short story in the *Haunted* collection is ‘Post-Production,’ a narrative that follows Tess Clark and her husband Nelson as they make an adult video as a moneymaking endeavour in order to afford IVF (in vitro fertilisation). Their initial enthusiasm and excitement at performing as amateur porn stars is

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<sup>134</sup> Mitchell and Snyder, *The Body and Physical Difference*, 68.

<sup>135</sup> Bradshaw, *Disabling Romanticism*, 31.

eventually lost, as they review the tapes and find themselves lacking the traditional look of the actors. Even with the effort of “breast implants as big as her spine would support” and botox-ed lips, Tess remains overtly disproportioned and, to her own eyes (and in comparison to other performers in the industry), old: <sup>136</sup> “the difference between how you look and how you see yourself is enough to kill most people.”<sup>137</sup> Tess here seems to suggest that signs of ageing are signifiers of deformity, with “loose skin [that] looked baggy and wadded around every orifice.”<sup>138</sup> However, even though Tess and her partner struggle so hard against signs of ageing, Palahniuk here presents Tess as ridiculous, her actions superfluous. Palahniuk almost punishes his characters for their obsession: Nelson leaves home and disappears, leaving Tess pregnant and alone. The unconventional, according to Tess, is the absolute abject: Palahniuk, on the other hand, renounces the apparent disdain for bodies that are old and fat, as something to be suppressed and repressed. According to Adorno, in *Aesthetic Theory*, “beauty is... the renunciation of what was once feared... the ugly.”<sup>139</sup> Palahniuk’s short story evokes disgust, because we can see ourselves in Tess’s position: “No amount of aerobic exercise or plastic surgery would ever make them look the way they’d imagined... All they saw were two almost hairless animals, hairless dark pink and proportioned all wrong, the way mongrel crossbreed dogs look, with short legs and long necks and thick torsos.”<sup>140</sup> In their pursuit of perfection, Tess and her husband have become monstrous. Palahniuk questions, much like Kristeva in her study *Horrors of Abjection*, whether we fear otherness, or the otherness within ourselves. We are disgusted by what is both familiar and defamiliarised — Tess is a model of the everywoman, grotesque because she does not fit into the perfect image of a woman, as evident in some pornography.

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<sup>136</sup> Palahniuk, *Haunted*, 142.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>139</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 65.

<sup>140</sup> Palahniuk, *Haunted*, 144.

The significance of real deformity however, rather than mere ugliness, is that it creates a state of difference. Palahniuk's novel *Haunted* is comprised of a host of characters that are either models of deformity or disability. Mr Whittier, for instance, suffers from progeria, a rare genetic condition that causes a child's body to prematurely age. His story, titled 'Dog Years,' features Brandon Whittier, a thirteen-year-old boy that looks to be eighty, and whose main pastime is seducing his nurses into bed under the guise of being of age. 'Dog Years' is yet another one of Palahniuk's narratives that highlights age and disability as apparent forms of deformity. Palahniuk forcibly ages Brandon by referring to him with the honorific Mister, ordinarily used with older, more mature men (as will be used for hereon). Mr Whittier's apparent immorality is worn on the outside, entirely visible. He stands in strong contrast, as a demon of sorts, to the beautiful 'angels' that volunteer to help care for him during his stay at the hospital: "never as beautiful as she looked, next to his spotted, veined old skin."<sup>141</sup> This ties in to the idea that deformity is inherently linked to moral perversion: illness, during the eighteenth century, was used to mean either "'wickedness, depravity, immorality' or 'unpleasantness, disagreeableness, hurtfulness.'"<sup>142</sup> However, Palahniuk again does not present deformity as necessarily evil, but something ignored and ostracised that deserves attention. Mr Whittier is a figure of misrecognition, placed at a nursing home for the old, despite being young. Palahniuk almost uses Mr Whittier to punish the "foolish, foolish angels"<sup>143</sup> that treat him as something to be pitied and refusing to really notice his true character, despite all the signifiers that point to his real age: "Mr Whittier with his fingernails painted black. A silver ring looped through one honking-big, old-man nostril."<sup>144</sup> The deformed and disabled body is no longer one of weakness or frailty, but is rather constructed as one of agency. Mr Whittier's body, although somewhat weak and

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>142</sup> Boyd, "Disease, illness, sickness," 9.

<sup>143</sup> Palahniuk, *Haunted*, 113.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 113.

ineffectual, has enabled him to act out his desires and obtain what he covets — the liberated body is one of desire. Although the story is undeniably shocking, engaging in representations of statutory rape and manipulation, Palahniuk subverts the traditional narrative of disability as a handicap and the disabled subject as victim.

Palahniuk is particularly interested in castration — another form of mutilation and deformity. Castration attributes to feelings of loss, as an emblem of the denatured male, and marginalisation. Probably the most notable figure of castration in Palahniuk's novels is Robert Paulson, a bodybuilder with testicular cancer in *Fight Club*. Bob occupies a body that has been feminised and made maternal with the loss of testosterone, with “new tits sprouted on his barrel chest.”<sup>145</sup> The novel implies there is something unconventional about Bob — he stands in strong contrast to the young and muscular bodies of the other members of fight club, his body entirely gendered. Readers of *Fight Club* view Bob's body with disgust, because of its excessive display of femininity that is out of place on a man. That said, although Bob's body could act as a source of shame and pain, especially in a society so heavily invested in masculinity, Bob instead acts as an allegorical warning against the hyper masculinity promoted by fight club. His death acts as a catalyst for the narrator to question the nature of masculinity, and, in turn, man's inability to remain masculine: “His name is Robert Paulson and he is forty-eight years old. His name is Robert Paulson, and Robert Paulson will be forty-eight years old, forever.”<sup>146</sup> Castration, according to Palahniuk, is synonymous with disavowal — his characters seek escape from repression by completely removing themselves from the category of men altogether. Bob is no longer subject to the criticism of his peers, as he himself is no longer able to conform to notions of masculinity and maleness. The novel *Haunted* similarly sees Saint Gut-Free ridiculed by the loss of his lower intestine — his masculinity was entirely tied up in his potential to play football in

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<sup>145</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 16.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

university: “here’s the kid they had hoped would snag a football scholarship and get an M.B.A.”<sup>147</sup> Although both men’s bodies are marked by otherness and are lacking in something intrinsic to traditional constructions of masculinity, they are not solely defined by their altered bodies.

Traditional narratives of deformity and disability, as explored in Palahniuk’s novels, are subverted, as Palahniuk explores agency and power in ordinarily disaffected and incapacitated people. Although the characters presented in Palahniuk’s novels are often disgusting and shocking, it is not so much their bodies that are grotesque as to how they hold a mirror up to society and its shortcomings.

### **The Monster**

The monstrous, within Palahniuk’s fiction, is represented through the physical and vulgar body. The characters of Palahniuk’s fiction are monsters, because they trouble categories of male and female, human and non-human. The monstrous body is constantly in a state of flux: dissolving, changing and unstable. The purpose of Palahniuk’s ‘monsters’ is not simply to shock and disturb readers, but to explore ideologies of normativity.

Halberstam and Livingston state, in *Posthuman Bodies*, that: “the monster functions as a monster... when it is able to condense as many fear-producing traits as possible into one body.”<sup>148</sup> The monster here accounts for any deviation from the norm, such as disease, deformity, and even gender. It was understood that those that resisted classification were monstrous — these people, the staple of freak shows, were discomfiting, because they forced audiences to come into contact with the parts of the human they were convinced they disliked. For instance, the hermaphrodite threatens normative gender roles and rejects classification; and the queer body denies that gender dictates sexuality. The monster, and

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<sup>147</sup> Palahniuk, *Haunted*, 19.

<sup>148</sup> Halberstam and Livingston, *Posthuman Bodies*, 3.

monstrous behaviour by extension, therefore “serves as an expression of those desires that the spectator has been trained... to disavow.”<sup>149</sup> Palahniuk critiques the notion that the monster, as described above, is something to be feared.

Palahniuk’s 2012 edition of *Invisible Monsters Remix* is predominately interested in body transformation and self-mutilation. The main premise of the novel sees Shannon McFarland, the novel’s protagonist, shoot herself in the face, removing her lower jaw and leaving her mute: “I remember thinking, this is going to be so exciting. My makeover. Here was my life about to start all over again.”<sup>150</sup> The traditional make-over narrative, with the traditional before and after transformation, is unmade, as we see Shannon completely sever ties with beauty and traditional beauty standards — “when I look at people, all I can see is the back of everybody’s head... ‘Oh, God,’ they say ‘Did you see that?’ And, ‘Was that a mask? Christ, it’s a bit early for Halloween.”<sup>151</sup> Shannon goes beyond simply getting fat or going bald, believing that such minor actions would see her relapse back into the old fantasy (of beauty and belonging). *Invisible Monster Remix* sees the “human-becoming-other;” the protagonist transformed *into* a monster.<sup>152</sup> The monster, according to Halberstam, “represent the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities.”<sup>153</sup> Shannon questions whether we fear the figure of the Other, or our own immersion with the Other: “it’s because we’re so trapped in our culture, in the being human on this planet with the brains we have, and the same two arms and two legs everybody has. We’re so trapped that any way we could imagine to escape would just be another part of the trap.”<sup>154</sup> Shannon here is questioning what it takes to be understood as human, and the idea that it is the body that allows for such a distinction — as seen above, some members of freak shows would not

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>150</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters Remix*, 136.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>152</sup> Halberstam and Livingston, *Posthuman Bodies*, 209.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>154</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters Remix*, 111.



fit into such a definition. The body, as presented in Palahniuk's novels, is incredibly vulnerable to decay and mutilation, which means that our status as human can easily come under threat. Palahniuk does not represent Shannon as a monster, with the image "Bubba-Joan [or Shannon, as they switch names] Got Her Jaw Shot Off," in order to disgust readers and mock deformity, but rather criticises the very definition of what it means to be human.<sup>155</sup> Palahniuk is rejecting the doctrine of essentialism — that we need to fit into fixed categories of man and woman, human and animal.

Furthermore, Shane, Shannon's estranged brother, promotes the transgender narrative within the text, as he opts to become a woman. Shane, as he transitions into Brandy Alexander, a near replica and uncanny double of her sister, is the "most significant source of rupture and denaturalisation in the novel."<sup>156</sup> Not only does Shane reinforce the vanity that Shannon is so desperately trying to escape, but inadvertently becomes a monster of excess — her hyperbolic model of femininity is perverse, less human and more freakish (a performance of gender, more theatrical): "Brandy unwinds the yards and yards of brocade scarf around her head. Brandy, she shakes her hair down her back and ties the scarf over her shoulders the hide her torpedo cleavage."<sup>157</sup> She is a monster of modification and prosthetics, unmade and remade into the uncanny: "we've done the scalp advancement, the brow lift, the brow bone shave. We've done the trachea shave, the nose contouring, the jawline contouring, the forehead realignment."<sup>158</sup> In her theory of gender and performativity, Judith Butler argues that one's behaviour determines gender; it is not necessarily "an internal reality," but something that is "being reproduced all the time."<sup>159</sup> Palahniuk, in much the same way, undermines the fixed constructs of the gendered body, suggesting instead that gender is fluid,

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>156</sup> Steinhoff, *Transforming Bodies*, 124.

<sup>157</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters Remix*, 13.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 207

<sup>159</sup> Big Think, *Judith Butler*.

or doesn't really exist: "I don't want my whole life crammed into a single word. A story. I want to find something else, unknowable, someplace to be that's not on the map."<sup>160</sup> The descriptions of Brandy are very similar to the cartoon renderings of Krao — artist renderings exaggerated her features to eventuate her racial otherness, with large lips and thick, dark hair. Brandy, on the other hand, is seen with "plumbago lips"<sup>161</sup> and "hairy pig-knuckled hands,"<sup>162</sup> accentuating her hybridity as a transgender male, and inability to fit into either category of male or female. Her very status as human, or her belonging to the category of gender altogether, is called into question, as each part of Brandy is relocated, rebuilt and altered to fit the image of the ideal woman: "'None of that is cheap...' Die Rhea says, 'This, this is how Brandy wanted to look, like her bitch sister.'"<sup>163</sup> Brandy, by duplicating her sister and adopting her persona through these procedures, makes it impossible for Shannon to successfully destroy her identity within the constructs of beauty and its' commercial value (even if she is simply parodying the culture). Readers find Brandy so uncomfortable, because she makes a mockery of the women we admire in the pages of beauty magazines — she functions, like many people who are addicted to plastic surgery, as an example of Freud's uncanny, recognisable as human, but strange.

The queer narrative running throughout the text is yet another narrative of difference. Shane's story, as well as Shannon's for that matter, can be understood as a revolt against oppression and repression. The siblings are figures of rebellion — Shannon strives for invisibility, but in turn gains more attention than ever, wearing her new face as a badge of defiance against a society obsessed with appearance. By contrast, Shane disrupts the heteronormative agenda, by making queerness visible and conspicuous (if not necessarily understood). Palahniuk here is claiming that, unlike in society (and literature) whereby

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<sup>160</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters Remix*, 112.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 204-5.

deformity and disability have historically existed in the realm of the unspeakable, they always garner a great deal of scrutiny. The very title of the novel, *Invisible Monsters Remix*, examines the notion of being seen or unseen. The monster has always been a figure “that [is] less intelligible, less than acceptable, unspeakable.”<sup>164</sup> The transgender narrative is ‘monstrous,’ in its’ original pre-2000s context, because of its status as taboo: “‘They yelled about how diseased I was being,’ Brandy says... ‘By ‘diseased’ I think they meant gay.’”<sup>165</sup> Palahniuk is critiquing norms regarding beauty and heteronormativity while validating difference: Shannon and Shane are unable to assimilate into normative society, as they are unable to reconcile their hybridised identities. Not only does Shane reject the image that his parents have afforded him (made in their image), but refuses to undergo sexual reassignment even if it results in exile and exclusion — “‘I’m not straight, and I’m not gay,’ she says. ‘I’m not bisexual. I want out of the labels.’”<sup>166</sup> Shannon is much the same, in that her ‘accident’ is entirely self-inflicted: “this little makeover would make piercings and tattoos and branding look so lame, all those little fashion revolts so safe that they themselves only become fashionable.”<sup>167</sup> Palahniuk’s ‘monsters’ evoke admiration, because they are willing to break free from the constraints of beauty and gender that govern society — we are disgusted because we continue to live in a world mediated by commodity culture, but do nothing to escape such a reality: “Fuck me. I’m so tired of being me. Me beautiful. Me ugly. Blond. Brunette. A million fucking fashion makeovers that only leave me trapped being me.”<sup>168</sup>

Further, the body of Shane/Brandy becomes a site for exploring gender roles and hierarchies. Brandy’s body becomes a model of the feminine, as she unmakes and remakes her body through procedure after medical procedure in order to create a new, hyper-

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<sup>164</sup> Jones and Harris, “Monsters, desire, and the creative queer body,” 519.

<sup>165</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters Remix*, 78

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

feminised model of a woman — “They cut out two of my ribs, and I never saw them again,’ Brandy says. ‘There’s something in the Bible about taking out your ribs.’”<sup>169</sup> The allusion, with the creation of Eve from Adam, reaffirms her transition from man to woman.

Furthermore, women, as successors to Eve, were considered imperfect when compared to men: the feminine body is unclean and filthy, because of its’ propensity to excrete, as with menstruation, childbirth and lactation. Shane’s transition into a woman could perpetuate the idea that women are ugly and lesser, if it was in fact the biggest mistake he could make: “You met three drags queens who paid you to start a sex change because you couldn’t think of anything you wanted less.”<sup>170</sup> That said, Palahniuk details the surgical process of becoming of woman or man, and, by doing so, undermines the constructs of femininity and masculinity: “to make a jawbone, the surgeons will break off parts of your shinbones, complete with the attached artery. First they expose the bone and scalp it right there on your leg.”<sup>171</sup> The fact that femininity can literally be constructed undoes the idea that gender is fixed. Palahniuk undermines monstrosity as inherently disgusting, that is, neither existing in the categories of man nor woman, by stating that regardless of how much you shatter, modify or reject the body, he/she still functions in the realm of the human.

The monstrous, as explored above, is presented sympathetically, as we have access to the past experiences and motivations of the siblings. Palahniuk is most interested in subverting the narrative of judgement toward difference, as something that is simply disgusting and shocking, instead representing his characters as real, credible people.

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 89.

## Chapter Three: Homoeroticism and Masculinity

The previous chapter highlighted Palahniuk's engagement with the non-normative and models of monstrosity. In this chapter, I will explore how homosexuality and homoeroticism fits into traditional ideas of masculinity, as represented in Palahniuk's fiction. Although on an initial reading it may appear that Palahniuk takes a pejorative position on sexual difference, in keeping with his use of disgust and shock, Palahniuk is instead critiquing mainstream attitudes toward homosexuality.

Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club* functions on two levels: firstly, as a disavowal of normal ideas of sexual difference, and secondly, a subversion of traditional understandings of masculinity and sexuality. Many of Palahniuk's characters, as represented in his novel *Fight Club*, all work to subvert, but sometimes also reaffirm, gender norms and hierarchies. Jack, our protagonist, I argue is a latently homosexual man who feels that his sexuality has been determined by the feminising effects of commodity culture.

*Fight Club* is no exception to the use of disgusting and shocking tropes — whether that be the unbridled violence depicted in the novel, or homoeroticism as taboo. In America in the 1990s, homosexuality was viewed as “a condition ‘just like alcohol...or sex addiction...or kleptomania’ — a pathology in need of treatment.”<sup>172</sup> In the mid-twentieth century, homosexuality was categorised by psychiatrists as a mental illness: “DSM-II (the American classification of mental disorders) listed homosexuality as a mental disorder.”<sup>173</sup> Palahniuk discusses homosexuality in this context and through the language of disavowal, and critiques the constructs of masculinity that give rise to such feelings of shame and guilt.

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<sup>172</sup> Franke-Ruta, “How America Got Past the Anti-Gay.”

<sup>173</sup> “When Homosexuality Stopped Being a Mental Disorder.”

## Masculinity in Crisis

The novel *Fight Club* follows an unnamed narrator, an everyman who suffers from insomnia, as he meets Tyler Durden, a rebellious and confident soap salesman. The narrator visits support groups for cancer survivors and other health related problems, in order to satisfy his need for intimacy and feeling. However, on meeting Tyler, the two men form an underground club, which replaces the support groups as a way of regaining some semblance of his lost masculinity. Fight club sees its' participants, tired of their everyday, mundane lives, routinely fight one another in order to commune and form bonds of intimacy. However, the group soon develops into an anti-corporate organisation named Project Mayhem, the members engaging in petty acts of vandalism and, progressively, acts of violence and terrorism. Palahniuk's novel is about masculinity in crisis, and the feminising effects of contemporary culture. Jack rationalizes that his more feminine tendencies are a result of commodity culture.

*Fight Club* is a story about men's experience of marginalisation and emasculation. According to Tyler, men have lost their purpose, and are therefore looking for a sense of identity: "You see a guy come to fight club for the first time, and his ass is a loaf of white bread."<sup>174</sup> The narrator, to be referred to as Jack hereafter, allows himself to be controlled by material desires and therefore relegated to the domestic sphere, his identity aligned with his belongings: "And I wasn't the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue."<sup>175</sup> His desires and tastes are the same as those of his friends and neighbours, and, much like the contents of his fridge, he has no real substance: "We all have the same Johanneshov armchair in the Strinne green stripe pattern... I know, I know, a house full of condiments and no real food."<sup>176</sup> Jack has no real sense of agency, as he picks and

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<sup>174</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 51.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-5.

chooses from a tailored catalogue, as “brand names have replaced ancestral names as markers of one’s identity.”<sup>177</sup> Palahniuk never gives his protagonist a name, further denying him a concrete sense of self. It is Tyler, with the establishment of fight club, that removes Jack from the 2D simulated Baudrillardian hyperreality of television, advertising and buyers catalogues: “After you’ve been to fight club, watching football on television is watching pornography when you could be having great sex.”<sup>178</sup> Palahniuk, by doing so, is establishing Jack as the feminized male subject who is seeking ‘recovery.’ Jack believes that reengaging his more conventionally masculine side will allow him to “break through the otherwise flat, shiny surface” of a life not really lived<sup>179</sup>: “I am stupid, and all I do is want and need things. My tiny life. My little shit job. My Swedish furniture. I never, no, never told anyone this, but before I met Tyler, I was planning to buy a dog ‘Entourage.’”<sup>180</sup>

In order to reassert his masculinity, Jack ‘creates’ Tyler Durden - independent, creative and, most importantly, masculine. Tyler embodies everything that Jack lacks, and becomes a model of admiration and imitation for other men. The image that Tyler projects is unattainable, as he too is a simulated reality, in much the same way as the IKEA catalogue. He is not real, and the fantasy of having complete agency over his world is also a delusion – Tyler is quite literally the embodiment of Jack’s dissociative personality disorder. Jack represents the “so-called death of the subject, or, more exactly, the fragmented and schizophrenic,” as theorized by Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*.<sup>181</sup> Jack ceases to exist in the presence of Tyler, a symptom of his “self/world disconnection and inner self/outer self-uncoupling.”<sup>182</sup> When Jack is under the guise of Tyler, he is able to reassert his masculine persona, whether it be having the audacity to start fight club (as he is

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<sup>177</sup> Del Gizzo, “The American Dream Unhinged,” 76.

<sup>178</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 50.

<sup>179</sup> Del Gizzo, “The American Dream Unhinged,” 89.

<sup>180</sup> Palahniuk *Fight Club*, 146.

<sup>181</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 413.

<sup>182</sup> Perez-Alvarez, “The Schizoid Personality,” 181.

so fully entrenched in the rules of the establishment), or engaging in heterosexual sex with Marla: as Jack “dreamed [he] was humping Marla Singer,” Tyler “comes to the kitchen table with hicks and no shirt and says... he met Marla Singer last night and they had sex.”<sup>183</sup> Del Gizzo, in her study of *Fight Club* as a modernised version of *The Great Gatsby* states that “*Fight Club* makes it clear that masculinity can be understood as an index of individualism” and hyper-masculinity is about rebelling against the dominant culture and asserting oneself.<sup>184</sup> Jack imagines that his masculine ideal is this unattainable version of himself — Palahniuk is revealing the absurdity of this position of lamenting the loss of masculinity, because the masculine ideal, as projected in the image of Tyler, was never anything but fantasy and a social construction.

Jack, and society at large, imagines that violence forms the cornerstone of masculinity. Tyler, as the masculine ideal, is inherently violent. The novel suggests that male violence has become less permissible in contemporary society under the influence of feminism: “He was in Seattle last week when a bartender in a neck brace told him that the police were going to crack down on fight clubs. The police commissioner himself wanted it special.”<sup>185</sup> Violence, as represented in the novel, is taboo and has therefore been forced underground – fight club is quite literally undertaken in a basement. The form of masculinity presented by *Fight Club* sees the complete breakdown of the social contract, and the establishment of violence as the ultimate masculine pastime: “After a night in fight club, everything in the real world gets the volume turned down.”<sup>186</sup> The one on one violence is reminiscent of Roman gladiator sparring – in this case, the basement takes the place of an arena, and, although the men do not fight to the death, the actual fight is similarly brutal: “the ‘sport’ was appallingly brutal, and many gladiators faced the arena with fear and trembling,

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<sup>183</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 57-8.

<sup>184</sup> Del Gizzo, “The American Dream Unhinged,” 73.

<sup>185</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 163-4.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.



especially those who were assigned to square off against wild animals.”<sup>187</sup> *Fight Club* does not encourage the sharing of feelings and hardships, as fostered in the support groups, but a more masculine, primal intimacy. The masculinity explored in the novel is still rooted in desire for Jack to be emotionally connected, but again, promoted by brutality and barbarity: “‘Get it out,’ Tyler said. ‘Trust me. You’ll feel a lot better. You’ll feel great.’”<sup>188</sup> *Fight Club* inevitably leads to Project Mayhem, as a classic strategy of escalation — the masculinity explored in the terrorist group is toxic. Jack is, at one point, opaquely referred to as a monster, a monster of hyper-masculinity and violence: “The monster hooks its bloody claw into the waistband of the manager’s pants, and pulls itself up to clutch the white starched shirt.”<sup>189</sup> The novel suggests that the consequence of untrammelled masculinity is crime, terror and monstrosity.

The violence explored in Project Mayhem recalls some of the practices used during wartime. One of the requirements to join Project Mayhem is three hundred dollars in cash, as “it costs three hundred dollars to cremate an indigent corpse,”<sup>190</sup> much like soldiers in the Vietnam War who were required to carry their own body bag.<sup>191</sup> *Fight Club* is addressing the very real possibility of death, as the men are essentially engaging in forms of terrorism. Project Mayhem reflects asymmetric warfare, a strategy adopted by a revolutionary group to overcome a much more powerful opposition, starting with relatively harmless measures such as graffiti and slogan, “who painted the blazing demon mask on the Hein Tower?,”<sup>192</sup> and progressing through to direct threats and terrorist bombings, “‘Bring me the steaming testicles of his esteemed honour, Seattle Police Commissioner Whoever’... We have five space monkeys hold him down... One space monkey tugged down his esteemed

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<sup>187</sup> Grimes, “The Gladiators.”

<sup>188</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 115.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>191</sup> Christopher McKay, interview by Dana McKay (Sydney 2019).

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

sweatpants... One space monkey wrapped the rubber band three times until it was tight around the top of his esteemed sack.”<sup>193</sup> Tyler has created the conditions for a war-like situation, which provides opportunities for brotherhood and masculine purpose.<sup>194</sup> Palahniuk is parodying, as evident in the following quote, the structure of self-help groups, in order to suggest that Project Mayhem functions in much the same way as the support groups. Both avenues act as a pretense for achieving some level of intimacy and catharsis: “Arson meets on Monday. Assault on Tuesday. Mischief meets on Wednesday. And Misinformation meets on Thursday. Organised chaos. The Bureaucracy of Anarchy.”<sup>195</sup>

Jack seems, on the face of it, quite happy to nest and engage in more feminine pastimes, but, as evident with his insomnia, he laments the loss of his affinity with the masculine. The novel is not about fight club, but about Jack coming to terms with his place in 1990s America and wider gender politics.

### **Homoeroticism**

Palahniuk explores homosocial and homoerotic tensions, through the realms of violence and sexual politics. I read *Fight Club* through the lens of queer theory — a queer reading considers how a text might engage with strangeness and difference in relation to gender and sexuality. Queer theorists including Butler and Sedgwick<sup>v</sup> explore the fluidity of sex and gender, and their constructedness. Masculinity, and in turn, femininity, is a performance of sorts, in much the same way that “all sexualities — homo-, hetero-, bi- and other — are forms of drag.”<sup>196</sup> However, much of Palahniuk’s novels do not represent homosexuality itself, but rather homoerotic desire. I believe Palahniuk is questioning the ‘myth of heteronormativity,’ suggesting that no-one is perfectly masculine and feminine, and, as stated

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 164-5.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>195</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 119.

<sup>196</sup> Bennett and Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 223.

above, gender is performative. Palahniuk is invariably questioning what it means to be a man — the answer is not, as presented by Tyler, extreme masculinity, but something more balanced. Not only is Jack trying to deal with what it means to be masculine in the 1990s, but his own queerness and how homosexuality fits into understandings of masculinity — Jack essentially conflates being homosexual with the lack of masculinity.

Palahniuk's discusses the nature of homoerotic desire and the taboo. Jack is never allowed to experience what it means to be a man with homoerotic desires, but made to embody a "masculinity that does not embrace, but rather abjects, any homoerotic desires."<sup>197</sup> The novel opens and closes with Jack forcibly restrained, with Tyler Durden's gun in his mouth — the phallic symbolism is clear: "The barrel of the gun pressed against the back of my throat... With my tongue I can feel the silencer holes we drilled into the barrel of the gun."<sup>198</sup> A lot of these allusions to homosexuality are Jack's imagined fantasy. However, such desires are sublimated through Tyler, as Jack is trying to repress his homosexual tendencies. The gun essentially distances Jack from the full force of homosexuality, and allows him to engage in the act without feelings of guilt and shame. Jack projects his confession of homosexuality onto Tyler, because only from the mouth of Tyler Durden is such an admission acceptable: "I look like you wanna look, I fuck like you wanna fuck. I am capable, smart, and most importantly, free in ways you are not."<sup>199</sup> Tyler is a character that exudes great personal power and is therefore able to express anything without fear of judgement. Tyler at one stage kisses the back of Jack's hand using lye (to create a permanent burn), which is an obviously feminine/homoerotic image, but, in the guise of Tyler doing it, it becomes a masculine rite of passage: "The wet kiss on the back of my hand held the flakes of lye while they burned."<sup>200</sup> The scarification left over is an outward symbol of his sexuality.

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<sup>197</sup> Tettenborn, "Will the Big Boys," 857.

<sup>198</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 11.

<sup>199</sup> Fincher, *Fight Club*.

<sup>200</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 74.

Palahniuk also discusses the nature of desire in a hyper-masculine space. Peele states, in his discussion of homoeroticism in *Fight Club*: “Chuck Palahniuk makes frequent references to the sexual desire that exists between many of the men in the novel, there are also references to romantic desire between men.”<sup>201</sup> Jack claims, in the first chapter of the novel, that he, Tyler and Marla Singer “have a sort of triangle thing going here. I want Tyler. Tyler wants Marla. Marla wants me.”<sup>202</sup> Rene Girard, in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1965), proposed that desire works in much the same way — the notion of mimetic desire, with the desiring subject, the rival-mediator and the object of desire, constructs a triangular feedback loop. Marla, as the object, is of secondary importance to the rivalry that exists between her two male suitors: “I’m beginning to wonder whether another woman is really the answer to what we need.”<sup>203</sup> Marla represents Jack’s attempts to achieve heterosexual normalcy — he can only have sex with Marla when he has fractured into Tyler Durden. Palahniuk does not make it clear whether or not Jack’s want is homoerotic in nature, or simply admiration.

Jack continually attempts to repress his more homosexual urges and desires, as seen in the character of Angel Face. Jack is seen to viciously pound his face, essentially destroying it, making it one of the more confronting scenes in the novel and film: “I wanted to destroy everything beautiful I’d never have... I held the face of mister angel like a baby or a football in the crook of my arm and bashed him with my knuckles, bashed him until his teeth broke through his lips.”<sup>204</sup> Jack is essentially striking out against Angel Face in a desperate attempt to undermine his attraction to him. It is the only fight that Jack himself, outside of Tyler, wins, which could act as a metaphor for his struggle against his sexuality. The novel is essentially exploring the social taboo in mainstream masculine culture against homosexual desire or homoeroticism. Even on their first meeting, Jack immediately tries to remove the

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<sup>201</sup> Peele, “‘Fight Club’s’ Queer Representations,” 863.

<sup>202</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 14.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 123-4.

figure of desire from sight: “So I tell mister angel he’s too young, but at lunch time he’s still there. After lunch, I go out and beat mister angel with a broom and kick the guy’s sack out into the street.”<sup>205</sup> The act of repression is even illustrated in the rules promoted by fight club: “First thing Tyler yells is, ‘The first rule about fight club is you don’t talk about fight club... The second rule about fight club,’ Tyler yells, ‘is you don’t talk about fight club.’”<sup>206</sup> Fight club, as presented in the quote, acts as a stand in for homosexuality itself, as the ultimate code of silence. This is reminiscent of the ‘Don’t ask, Don’t tell’ policy that was implemented in the United States military in response to homosexual activity by soldiers: “homosexual servicemen and servicewomen could remain in the military if they did not openly declare their sexual orientation.”<sup>207</sup> I argue that Palahniuk is juxtaposing the two sets of rules to draw attention to the inherent concerns that Jack has about revealing his sexuality.

Palahniuk pays particular interest to the bodies of men as objects of desire. The following quote highlights the importance of physicality not for aesthetic purpose, but for its’ potential to fight, tying the body to the expression of conventional ideals of masculinity: “I just don’t want to die without a few scars. It’s nothing anymore to have a beautiful stock body.”<sup>208</sup> The male body becomes eroticised as a spectacle, as something to be viewed and watched in motion: “Tyler runs through the other rules: two men per fight, one fight at a time, no shoes, no shirts.”<sup>209</sup> The fight itself becomes of secondary importance to the physicality of the male body, as it is put on display. The scene is not unlike the spectacle of the active, muscled bodies witnessed in Zack Snyder’s film *300*, with its’ Spartan warriors made into the hypermasculine ideal, with oiled and over stylized CGI (computer generated imagery) bodies. These bodies, however, act as the embodiment of Sparta’s national values and patriotism,

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>207</sup> “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”

<sup>208</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 48.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 50.

with their ability to fight as one single, unbroken unit for their country. The men in *Fight Club* work to become such an ideal and strive against the femininity of the 1990s. Violence acts as a way of aggressively reclaiming conventional masculine tropes and behavior.

The figure of Bob, however, becomes a figure of the Other, and functions to subvert the spectacle of the male form. Bob, having lost his testicles to testicular cancer, has become a ‘monster of excess’ with large “bitch tits” that again interrupt the enjoyment of the male form in action.<sup>210</sup> Bob is almost punished by the narrative for his femininity, existing as a monstrous hybrid of both man and woman.<sup>211</sup> Palahniuk questions, through the feminisation of Bob and the narrator himself (as a figure of the domestic), what it means to be a man. Jack, however, shows real disdain for bodies that are “[simulations] of experience”<sup>212</sup>: “the gyms you go to are crowded with guys trying to look like men, as if being a man means looking the way a sculptor or an art director says.”<sup>213</sup> The bodies of those in *300* are not just models of spectacle and “about looking good,” but figures of agency (almost invincible and superhuman).<sup>214</sup> Bob’s ‘bitch tits,’ as a symbol of the feminine body and maternity, align him more with Ephialtes, the hunchback from *300* who is denied entry into the Spartan Army because of his deformity. Bob, however, is not denied entry into fight club and still carries out the rituals outlined by Tyler, despite his traditionally imperfect male body. The masculine body here doesn’t necessarily define masculinity.

The violence of fight club also recalls the early Greek Olympic Games, whereby men were in similar states of undress, and the violence exhibited was brutal and uncontained. Howse, in his article in *The Telegraph*, states: “competitive exercises were called agon, connected with our word agony... Athletes expected ponos, pain, both in training and in the

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>211</sup> Rehling, “Fight Club takes a beating,” 196.

<sup>212</sup> Burgess, “Revolutionary Bodies,” 273.

<sup>213</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 50.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 51.

event.”<sup>215</sup> Not only was there an expectation of pain, it could be argued that the inflicting of pain, and the receiving of pain, was an intrinsic part of the ritual:

“Last week, I tapped a guy and he and I got on the list for a fight. This guy must’ve had a bad week, got both my arms behind my head in a full nelson and rammed my face into the concrete floor until my teeth bit open the inside of my cheek and my eye was swollen shut and was bleeding, and after I said stop, I could look down and there was a print of half my face in blood on the floor.”<sup>216</sup>

The Greek Games also celebrated the eroticized male form: “everyone knows that the original Olympics... were all about watching naked men. Sure, it was a sporting event, but it was also a softly pornographic group voyeuristic tournament.”<sup>217</sup> As fight club is limited to male participants, the male body is “marked as an erotic object of another male look.”<sup>218</sup> Palahniuk here is subverting traditional modes of masculinity, by exploring masculinity as openly sexual and erotically charged. As Schuckmann states, in *Masculinity, the Male Spectator and the Homoerotic Gaze*: “they are constructed to be looked at, to attract, to seduce, to be consumed and to incite consumption.”<sup>219</sup> Jack, even when in the guise of Tyler Durden, can’t help but to depict the fighting as a homoerotic spectacle, as a symptom of his desire.

Palahniuk, with the establishment of fight club, offers a new way for men to be together, whether it be a kind of homosocial bonding or the playing out of homoerotic desire. As O’Hagan states, on how homoeroticism and brotherhood functions in fraternities: “a world in which homosexuality is taboo but cross-dressing and semi-naked wrestling are acceptable and parading your penis and testicles is almost de rigueur.”<sup>220</sup> Fight club allows its

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<sup>215</sup> Howse, “Olympics: the naked truth.”

<sup>216</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 51.

<sup>217</sup> Beusman, “A Brief History.”

<sup>218</sup> Rehling, “Fight Club takes a beating,” 198.

<sup>219</sup> Schuckmann, “Masculinity, the Male Spectator,” 671.

<sup>220</sup> O’Hagan, “Humiliation, homoeroticism.”

participants the opportunity to touch and connect in socially permitted ways, as a celebration of male power. The physical intimacy promoted by the support group is not enough, as it is limited to hugs: “Bob’s big arms were closed around to hold me inside, and I was squeezed in the dark between Bob’s new sweating tits.”<sup>221</sup> As Omerso suggests, in his study of queer trauma, fight club “enables intense physical and spiritual sensation,” outside of sex and the physicality of sexuality.<sup>222</sup> Das, in his work on gender and intimacy in wartime, discusses the nature of comradeship and trench brotherhood, which, as we find in *Fight Club*, incorporated forms of homosocial bonding and affection as a way of coping with trauma. Das includes in his study a number of the soldier’s wartime poetry to illustrate the bonds that existed between the men: “his heart was as big as his body — his strength like a lion’s — his touch to the wounded as a woman’s”; “My comrade, that you could rest/ Your tired body on mine”; and “I held him in my arms to the end, and when his soul had departed I kissed him twice.”<sup>223</sup> It is in this context that men are free to be able to express their feelings for one another, without judgement. Even after the most graphic depictions of violence and assault, as witnessed throughout *Fight Club*, the two fighters leave the match amiable: “I shake the guy’s hand and say, good fight. This guy, he says, ‘How about next week?’”<sup>224</sup> The fight isn’t about animosity, but about the ritual of pain and experience of intimacy.

Fight club functions in much the same way as Das’ account — vulnerable men find support and relief from scrutiny and criticism through male bonding. As Das states in his study: “these moments of physical bonding and tactile tenderness during trench warfare require us to reconceptualise masculinity, conventional gender roles, and notions of same-sex intimacy.”<sup>225</sup> Much like wartime relations, fight club sublimates any libidinal desires and

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<sup>221</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 16.

<sup>222</sup> Omerso, “Is the Post-in Postgay,” 53.

<sup>223</sup> Das, *Touch and Intimacy*, 53.

<sup>224</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 51.

<sup>225</sup> Das, *Touch and Intimacy*, 53.



impulses into more socially acceptable forms. The shocking or provocative aspect of this is the lengths that Jack will go to repress his queer desires. The tragedy is that Jack's perverse embrace of violent masculinity, as exemplified in Tyler, ultimately results in the exacerbation of his mental illness, violence, crime and, as will be discussed below, his death.

Palahniuk's novels continually interrogate the categories of sexual difference and gender identity. Sisko, in his study of homoeroticism in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), states that the murder of Basil, Dorian's object of affection, sees the "erasure of homoerotic desire."<sup>226</sup> This could, in turn, be argued in terms of the figurative death of Tyler. David Fincher's 1999 reproduction of *Fight Club* closes with the uniting of Jack and Marla, of man and woman, holding hands atop of a downtown skyscraper, again reinforcing heteronormativity. Palahniuk's novel also sets up a similar heteronormative narrative, with Marla confessing her feelings for Jack: "'It's not love or anything,' Marla shouts, 'but I think I like you, too.'"<sup>227</sup> That said, Palahniuk could be criticising Jack's return to convention and disavowal of his identity, creating a story of repression and deceit. The novel, however, has a much less conventional or happy ending. It sees Jack commit suicide: "Tyler is gone... The barrel of the gun tucked into my surviving cheek... I have to do this... And I pull the trigger."<sup>228</sup> Even though Marla openly returns his feelings, as quoted above, Jack is still unable to live without the figure of Tyler as a heterosexual man. The film ultimately defers to a mainstream narrative of heteronormativity. By contrast the novel pushes the boundaries and explores the taboo surrounding homoeroticism and homosexual desire.

Palahniuk provokes and disturbs his readers in order to get them to contemplate their attitudes, biases and systems of value. Although homosexuality is no longer perceived in the

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<sup>226</sup> Sisko, "Communicating homoerotic desire," 4.

<sup>227</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 205.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

same way it was in the 1980s, as a condition in need of treating, it still marginalized in culture and society at large.

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<sup>v</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, American author of *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), is best known for her work in the field of queer studies. Sedgwick argued that sexuality was central to understandings of modern culture, and encouraged people to read texts through the lens of queer theory. Sedgwick, much like Butler, questioned the essentialism of heteronormativity and the stability of sexual identity.

## Chapter Four: Rape and Pornography

In addition to exploring representations of violence between men, Palahniuk also explores violence against women. One question raised by Palahniuk's oeuvre is whether he criticises representations of women in pornography, or satirises the romance genre for its' recent focus on sex and bondage, discipline, sadism and masochism (BDSM) role plays (such as the recent interest with E.L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey*). Pornography has become increasingly accessible, with its move from print media, such as *Playboy*, *Hustler* and *Penthouse*, to a digital form (with videos posted to online sites such as *PornHub*).

Palahniuk does not make a final claim in relation to the nature of pornography, but discusses female representation and sexual expression as it pertains to a form that is traditionally seen as sexist and exploitative. By acknowledging rape and patriarchal violence, Palahniuk does not promote the silence and narratives of suppression that usually accompanies such confronting issues. The novel *Beautiful You* explores the construction and performance of sexuality, both as it is seen in and outside pornography. The boundaries between representation and reality become blurred, as the female protagonist enters into the world of sex toys, performativity and commodified sex.

*Beautiful You* follows the main character, Penny Harrigan, a young intern at a law firm, who finds herself the object of affection of Manhattan elite C. Linus Maxwell, an affluent and well-known business tycoon. The central premise of the novel surrounds Maxwell's creation and perfecting of his new line of sex toys, all tested on Penny, to be sold to women across the world (with apocalyptic results). That is, men are made obsolete, no longer needed for sexual gratification, and the women completely withdraw from the workforce, preferring instead to stay at home and masturbate. Sex remains the focus of the novel, as Palahniuk explores its' representation through the lens of sexism and violence.

## Rape

The sex represented in Palahniuk's *Beautiful You* is, at times, violent, confronting and obscene, as the novel not only opens with a rape scene, but a number of incidents of near rape throughout the text. Rape is by its' nature prohibited, and there has been considerable controversy in its' representation in novels and film. Jennifer Kent's 2018 film *The Nightingale* saw an overwhelmingly negative response to the violence of the rape scenes, as evident in the *Independent's* article, '*The Nightingale*: Audience members 'walk out' of revenge thriller over brutal rape scenes.'<sup>229</sup> Rape has become an "overused plot point in movies and TV shows" and raised questions about the need to represent such narratives.<sup>230</sup> It has "also become the centre of a fierce debate about whether portraying rape in fiction is unnecessary, manipulative, and even harmful... In short, anyone can write a rape scene – but should they? Chances are, the answer is no."<sup>231</sup> Not only does Palahniuk represent rape, proving that rape is a reality for women, but multiple instances of rape: "When Penny was in college, a beer-saturated Zeta Delt had dragged her down some stairs into a dirt-floored cellar... In retrospect, she recognised that she might've promised the young man more than she was willing to deliver."<sup>232</sup> Although the amount of rape that occurs within the novel may seem excessive, the occurrence of rape in United States fraternities is disturbingly high: "numerous studies have found that men who join fraternities are three times more likely to rape... and that one in five women will be sexually assaulted in four years away at school."<sup>233</sup> Palahniuk is exploring rape culture and the toxic masculinity that is promoted in fraternities — fraternities are almost sacred, which makes Palahniuk's exploration all the more

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<sup>229</sup> O' Connor, "The Nightingale."

<sup>230</sup> Hudson, "Rape Scenes Aren't Just Awful."

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*, 28.

<sup>233</sup> Valenti, "Frat brothers rape 300% more."

significant. Rape is facilitated by the power imbalance between the genders: “‘Women are the new masters,’ Max boasted, ‘but now I am the master of women.’”<sup>234</sup> Viridi, in her analysis of rape culture, states that: “the erasure of rape from the narrative bears the marks of a patriarchal discourse of honour and chastity; yet showing rape, so, some argue, eroticises it for the male gaze and purveys the victim myth.”<sup>235</sup> By people walking out, as stated above in the Cannes film festival screening of *The Nightingale*, they are playing into the hands of a patriarchy who would often prefer to not have the matter discussed at all, or, as stated above, are made to live vicariously through experiences of rape that were unnecessarily graphic: “vacuum-packing a non-stop supply of rapes, deaths and beatings into more than two hours is needlessly punishing and comes at the expense of character and story.”<sup>236</sup> However, I believe that Palahniuk, as well as Kent, treats rape as more than a statistic, by not allowing it to be sanitized of violence and brutality.

The act of rape, as seen in the novel, is witnessed solely by men, again reaffirming the powerlessness of Penny, and by extension women as a whole (including female readers). The rape takes place in a courtroom, as Penny testifies against Linus Maxwell for not naming her as a collaborator in the making of his new line of sex toys. Even the reader is made complicit in the act, as a witness that is unable to stop the crime taking place. The act of rape is not represented to simply elicit disgust and shock, but comment on bystander behaviour: “Even as Penny was attacked, the judge merely stared. The jury recoiled. The journalists recoiled in the gallery. No one in the courtroom came to her rescue. The court reporter continued to dutifully keyboard, transcribing Penny’s words: ‘Someone, he’s hurting me! Please stop him!’”<sup>237</sup> Although the men do not revel in the pain suffered by Penny, they do nothing to stop the trauma taking place and the scene becomes voyeuristic: “A few tentative hands rose

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<sup>234</sup> Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*, 188.

<sup>235</sup> Viridi, “Reverence, Rape – and then Revenge,” 266.

<sup>236</sup> O’Connor, “The Nightingale.”

<sup>237</sup> Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*, 1.

among the spectators, each cupping a cell phone and snapping a surreptitious picture or a few seconds of video.”<sup>238</sup> Palahniuk is, furthermore, making a statement on the failure of the judicial system to treat sexual violence seriously. As seen in the case of *Kavanaugh v. Blasey Ford*, Blasey Ford’s evidence of rape wasn’t held to be convincing enough to halt Judge Brett M. Kavanaugh’s nomination into the United States supreme court: “Republican senators emerged Thursday evening from a closed-door meeting, pledging to push ahead with a committee vote... which would advance the nomination to full Senate... The Arizona senator seemed to be wrestling with how to reconcile the competing accounts.”<sup>239</sup> It also comments on the same systems’ requirement to make women reenact, or relive, incidents of rape when giving evidence in court (which almost acts as a secondary rape of sorts). Although the scene is graphic and confronting, it holds a mirror up to issues present within our own society.

Palahniuk explores the inequality created by patriarchal culture, and the social bonds that naturally exist between women. The women in *Beautiful You*, including Penny herself, no longer feel comfortable in the company of men: “It would’ve been different if there had been other women in the courtroom, but there were none. In the past few months, all women had disappeared from sight.”<sup>240</sup> The men are often represented as aggressive and violent — even Tad, a work peer of Penny’s and one of the most respectable of the men presented in the novel, goes as far as to reduce Penny to an object of sex: “At this Tad materialised and slipped an arm possessively around her waist... He held her so close she could feel his erection through the thin fabric of his tuxedo pant leg. There it was again. He was pressuring her for sex.”<sup>241</sup> It would seem that sexual assault is ubiquitous, as the above scenario essentially portrays workplace sexual harassment, and male sexuality, according to Palahniuk, is intrinsically aggressive and destructive.

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>239</sup> Gay Stolberg and Fandos, “Brett Kavanaugh and Christine Blasey Ford.”

<sup>240</sup> Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*, 1.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 133.

The creation of Incel, also known as ‘Involuntary Celibacy,’ acts as evidence of current cultures of misogyny (similar to what is represented in Palahniuk’s novels). Incel is an online subculture, principally in the United States, defined by resentment, misogyny and self-pity, made up “almost entirely [of] men and boys who pollute their online forums with posts blaming women for their sexless lives... calling for other Incels to follow up with... ‘mass rape.’”<sup>242</sup> There is a real rage and hatred projected toward women, as presented in the following quote by an Incel member on 4chan: “Our whole lives we’ve had to endure the pain of being so physically repulsive to females that they’d never even consider giving us a chance. We are actually so genetically inferior that they HATE us. They need to suffer... Their hypocrisy is a crime [punishable by] torture for the rest of their slutty lives.”<sup>243</sup> Incel is a political movement established in response to the perceptions that men have become marginalised and powerless in the face of rampant female power. Even pornography champions the female, as men are almost all but absent from the form altogether. This can also be seen in *Beautiful You*, whereby the male population is made obsolete with the growth of sex toys, as produced by Maxwell himself. One scene presents a faction of men burning the dildos and other sex toys that threaten their place in women’s lives: “The cameras drew closer, and Penny witnessed what looked like any male’s vision of hell. Innumerable multitudes of severed penises were writhing in the conflagration... Aflame.”<sup>244</sup> Although the image is absurd, it serves to illustrate male anxiety in the face of their own worthlessness and castration — the only thing they have to offer is their ability to perform sexually, which, as seen above, is expendable.

However, as the final plot twist is revealed, and the act of rape is actually shown to be masturbation (as there is no “attacker”<sup>245</sup> as initially stated, but instead an “invisible

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<sup>242</sup> Vox, “Our incel problem.”

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*, 176.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 1.

attacker”<sup>246</sup>), Palahniuk is critiquing patriarchy’s denial of female pleasure: “women’s lesser sexuality arises because patriarchal culture represses female sexual desire.”<sup>247</sup> Our feelings toward Penny are complicated; much like the people that witness the attack in the courtroom, we approach the scene not necessarily with outrage, but feel embarrassed and even ashamed on Penny’s behalf: “‘Please stop him,’ Penny wailed. ‘He’s controlling my mind!’ Of their own volition, her hands were stripping away her blouse... Helpless, Penny felt her body respond to an invisible attacker.”<sup>248</sup> Although there is no actual penetration or touching of any sort, Penny is under the control of a man — she is compelled by some force to act out of character. I argue that Palahniuk invites the reader to initially see Penny as a nymphomaniac, with her open display of her sexuality and sexual desires, which is so condemned by modern society. The figure of Penny as victim is therefore subverted, and she is blamed for the trauma: “Noticing her distress, Tad cut in. ‘Your honour,’ he addressed the judge, ‘it appears that the witness is falling ill.’”<sup>249</sup> Palahniuk places the reader in the position of juror (to further the courtroom analogy), and makes them waver between two extremes of feeling; sympathy and suspicion. Palahniuk is making us question Penny’s version of the truth, by switching the narrative. Palahniuk reveals the difficulties that rape victims in court have to overcome, such as jurors disbelieving the uncorroborated evidence of a woman, to prove their allegations: as with the case of Blasey, “‘there is doubt... We’ll never move beyond that.’”<sup>250</sup>

The scene perpetuates the patriarchal myth of rape as a fantasy, by portraying Penny as a nymphomaniac and single-mindedly sex driven. Palahniuk here “produces the ambiguity” that almost justifies and excuses any sexual violence — it is by Penny’s hand, and therefore she fully consenting to any and all brutality enacted against her.<sup>251</sup> The author

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>247</sup> Baumeister and Twenge, “Cultural Suppression of Female Sexuality,” 169.

<sup>248</sup> Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*, 201.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>250</sup> Gay Stolberg and Fandos, “Brett Kavanaugh and Christine Blasey Ford.”

<sup>251</sup> Gubar, “Representing Pornography,” 730.



further complicates the scene, as the ‘rape’ represented is not necessarily unpleasant: “Max pressed one button, and she instantly tasted phantom chocolate. The best dark chocolate she’d ever known.”<sup>252</sup> Freud suggested that women have masochistic tendencies, and are responsible for their own assault: “Freud bequeathed to us the notion of rape as a victim-precipitated phenomenon. If, as Freud insisted, women are indeed masochistic, rape — either in fantasy or in fact — can satisfy those self-destructive needs.”<sup>253</sup> I do not believe that Palahniuk is portraying Penny in such a way to further the myth that women bring rape upon themselves, that is, that “girls who wear short skirts, jeans and lipstick are asking to be gang raped,” but rather suggest that female empowerment and freedom from rape doesn’t mean women have to be abstinent.<sup>254</sup> Lars von Trier’s *Nymphomaniac* similarly explores female sexuality and sexual deviancy, and women who desire to have sex without feelings of shame: “Her drive is not a disease, she asserts, but who she essentially is.”<sup>255</sup> It is contrary to our expectations, as women, as represented in literature and film, are tentative and benevolent, whilst Joe, the female protagonist in *Nymphomaniac*, is the sexual aggressor. Penny’s public display of masturbation can be read as a demonstration of protest against the patriarchal suppression of female sexuality and the idea that men regulate and control sexual relations: “Her feet kicked off the shoes that seemed to trap them.”<sup>256</sup>

The idea that sex is innately masochistic, as promoted by Palahniuk and von Trier, promotes the notion of sex as subjugation. The sex toy, or in this case the remote controller used by Maxwell in court, almost becomes an agent of the man that made it, and the scene as written above remains a rape of sorts (if slightly fantastical): “As Penny took her seat behind the microphone and stated her name for the record, he reached one pale hand into his suit

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<sup>252</sup> Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*, 201.

<sup>253</sup> Albin, “Psychological Studies of Rape,” 423.

<sup>254</sup> Butcher, “Girls wearing short skirts.”

<sup>255</sup> Atkinson, “Lars von Triers Knows Nothing.”

<sup>256</sup> Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*, 200.

jacket and removed a small black object. This he held on the palm of one hand and began to manipulate as if he were keyboarding a test message... a *text massage*.”<sup>257</sup> The sex toy named *the Dragonfly*, a device that is inserted into the vagina for orgasmic stimulation, releases nanobot technology into the user, allowing Maxwell to effectively control their libido through his controller mentioned above: “‘Through Beautiful You,’ Max said proudly, ‘I’ve successfully implanted nanobots in ninety-eight-point-seven percent of the adult women in the industrialised world.’”<sup>258</sup> Maxwell, by creating and using such a device, is effectively able to control women’s bodies and their ‘pleasure.’ The sex toys therefore act not only to explore new forms of sexual violence made possible by technology, but also as a metaphor for culture itself — instead of nanobot technology, women are controlled by other means, such as socialised gender norms. As Karen Horney states, in *Feminine Psychology*, “women have adapted themselves to the wishes of men and felt as if their adaptation were their true nature.”<sup>259</sup> *Beautiful You* makes readers uncomfortable, as it makes us question our own experiences — that is, that the female sexuality is mediated by men, and whether we ourselves are an example of what Horney is discussing.

Although the rape invariably undoes all the work Penny had achieved during her time with Baba Grey-Beard (a sex witch that teaches Penny the ways of sexual gratification), “Tad stared at her in shocked disbelief. She was no longer the accomplished sex witch,” it does propel her into what I see as her final sexual becoming.<sup>260</sup> The reader witnesses Penny’s transition from a mere test dummy, “sweaty slab of meat under someone else’s erotic control,” into a sexual being.<sup>261</sup> Penny ultimately kills Maxwell, and destroys his controller, removing the possibility of anyone else harnessing the power over women again: “Mash the

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>259</sup> Horney, *Feminine Psychology*, 56.

<sup>260</sup> Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*, 202.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 202.

evil controller device betwixt two large rocks before it *seduces you*.”<sup>262</sup> The novel ends on a rather optimistic note, that is, that women are free from Maxwell’s control, and therefore men are no longer seen as a threat. However, the novel does end with ambiguity, with the suggestion that Penny may, in the future, be seduced by power in much the same way as Maxwell: “Little one, such power will corrupt you as it did Maxwell.”<sup>263</sup> This evidences the idea that woman can wield the same power as men if the opportunity arises – power is effectively gender-neutral.

Palahniuk’s novel *Beautiful You* explores the constructs of misogyny, as the men in the novel attempt to control female sexuality and pleasure. Even as women attempt to achieve sexual gratification and independence, by using gadgetry, Palahniuk makes it clear that men still control aspects of the technology. Palahniuk is presenting a novel of female empowerment, but with caveat.

## **Pornography**

Pornography, according to Dines, Jensen and Russo in their study of pornographic videos and novels, is “a product made primarily by men, primarily for men, in a patriarchal society.”<sup>264</sup> The sexuality represented in pornography is structured on the logic of fantasy — all women are presented as nymphomaniacs or at least vulnerable to the power of men, a preconception that exist in the minds of men as wish fulfilment, and men are permitted to have intercourse with women that are naturally ready and willing.

The woman is the primary focus of what takes place — it is her body that is fetishised and intentionally positioned for maximum visibility. A pornographic video director states, on the nature of such a set up: “Very unnatural position. The girls hate it... But it shoots

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>264</sup> Dines, Jensen and Russo, *Pornography*, 70.

beautifully, because everything's opened up to the camera."<sup>265</sup> In the case of Palahniuk's fiction, Penny, as the protagonist, is similarly exposed to the male gaze, in order to emulate some of the tropes of pornography and the power hierarchies that exist within the genre — women are figures of submissiveness, and men, as the dominant gender, control the progression of the scene. The needs of the male are valued over the needs of the female — pornography is about reinforcing male potency and power.

Pornography is not necessarily proscribed, unless the material crosses the line into what is illegal, such as child pornography and snuff films. I do not want to conflate pornography with violence — not all pornography is violent, and the acting out of sexual aggression is not necessarily a result of engagement with pornographic material. Additionally, “one of the common criticisms of the anti-pornography critique is that it focuses on a small segment of the market that is particularly violent and degrading to women.”<sup>266</sup> Palahniuk, however, depicts sex as violent, and strips away the fantasy elements. The following quote does not represent an instance of rape in the novel, but the sex still remains graphic and abusive: “He climbed atop her on the bed and bullied her legs apart. Shucking his undershorts, he made no pretence of giving her pleasure. A trickle of clear slime dripped from his erection as he stroked it against her.”<sup>267</sup> I argue that Palahniuk is critiquing men's (being the primary target/demographic of pornography) inability to separate pornography, with its propensity for more graphic representations of sex, and real life. The realms of pornographic intercourse and real life experience here overlap and become inseparable. The sex scenes between Maxwell and Penny are incredibly intense, with Penny at one point almost dying of pleasure: “Use the breath I'm putting inside you to cry out... Do not die while you have so much pleasure still awaiting you...”<sup>268</sup> The power structures that

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>266</sup> Dines, Jensen and Russo, *Pornography*, 71.

<sup>267</sup> Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*, 141.

<sup>268</sup> Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*, 52.

exist in pornography are mirrored in Palahniuk's *Beautiful You*, and contribute to feelings of disgust and shock – the above quote could be Palahniuk's venturing into the snuff genre of pornography, potentially the most disturbing of all pornographic videos, as it is outright criminal.

Any instances of sex and sexuality explored in Palahniuk's novels are perverse — in *Beautiful You* alone, the sex represented between Penny and Maxwell is more scientific than passionate. Maxwell does not fit into the “gendered categories” set up by pornography: although he is confident and forward in his machinations, he does not seem to be motivated by any sexual drive.<sup>269</sup> His pleasure is entirely derived from feelings of domination and control. A number of pornographic novels, as presented and examined by Dines in *Pornography: The Production and Consumption of Inequality*, see their female protagonists excuse violence and assault, and desire to engage in the sex/rape with consent: “[A woman is tied up by several men for a gang rape]: Sheila whimpered pitifully and tugged furiously at the ropes. She was no longer angry at Neil and Robbie. She merely wanted to free herself in order to play with the young man's prick and balls (*Sheila Spreads Wide*, p.65).”<sup>270</sup> The above scenario is shocking, because it is contrary to our expectations of what Sheila should feel. Penny however chooses to exact revenge against Maxwell for his exploits, for reducing her to the status of a “guinea pig,” by taking him to court, again reaffirming her subjectivity as a woman with the power to decide and reject a man's advances.<sup>271</sup>

The sex represented in the novel borders on BDSM — although the act of sex itself does inherently involve the politics of power, BDSM foregrounds power (as something that is sought after and desired), with couples adopting the roles of submissive or dominant. Although the power dynamics are somewhat similar, in that Penny is made to be more

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<sup>269</sup> Dines, Jensen and Russo, *Pornography*, 90.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>271</sup> Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*, 93.

vulnerable, Maxwell never fully engages in the sex on a physical level but rather enjoys Penny's pleasure, and, at times, discomfort: "The sensation began like a sweet burning within her groin. Then a delicious cramping... Savouring her reaction, the gloating genius waved to flag a waiter."<sup>272</sup> This attitude toward sexual relations, that is, being removed from the intercourse (as if behind a camera), reaffirms the relationship as something closer to a transaction of sorts, in much the same way as pornography is an entertainment industry itself. Penny is not only humiliated and shamed by her public display of sexuality, but also reminded of her position as subservient: "It reminded her of the moment they'd first met: her sprawled on the carpet, seeing her own disheveled face reflected in the polished toe of his homemade footwear."<sup>273</sup> Palahniuk is essentially asking his readers, by ultimately presenting Penny as the subject of violence and humiliation, is this really what women want? The reader is uncomfortable reading about the relations between Penny and Maxwell, as it borders on nonconsensual, much like the pornography that Dines and Jensen discuss.

In the novel, the male is not so concerned with the act of sex but dominance and control. Maxwell responds to Penny's suffering and discomfort with ridicule, questioning her role as a woman: "'You are still a young girl,' Maxwell said... 'If you can't cope with the full potential of a woman's body, I understand.'"<sup>274</sup> In Palahniuk's *Beautiful You*, a woman's role is "a slut... whose primary, if not only, purpose is to be sexual with men"<sup>275</sup>: as Brillstein, Penny's boss, states on having the opportunity to have intercourse with her, "Well, just as I suspected... It is a spicy little whore, after all."<sup>276</sup> If Penny is unwilling to perform as expected, she loses her value as a woman: "Penny wasn't a prude. She wasn't some prim, tongue-clucking schoolmarm type. To her, intimacy outside of marriage wasn't sinful..."

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>275</sup> Dines, Jensen and Russo, *Pornography*, 79.

<sup>276</sup> Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*, 140.

she'd simply never seen the margin in casual sex."<sup>277</sup> Penny is ultimately placed in a submissive position, whereby she must please Maxwell if she hopes to continue a life of luxury and notoriety. She does not strive for any semblance of personal power until the later stages of the novel — instead, her main motivation in agreeing to such a scheme is garnering affection and love from Maxwell, and any other rewards of dating a rich, older man: “‘For this kind of publicity,’ the woman admonished, ‘the people at Dolce and Gabbana ought to be paying you to wear their clothes.’”<sup>278</sup> The female protagonist of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, similarly, agrees to sex with pain in order to please a man: “Sometimes, Ana says yes to sex she’s uncomfortable with because she’s too shy to speak her mind, or because she’s afraid of losing Christian.”<sup>279</sup> Palahniuk explicitly states what *Fifty Shades* is unable to, which is that sex and affection are independent of one another: “Despite their delightful effects, the Beautiful You products generated merely a powerful love substitute. Her darkest fear was that the world’s women wouldn’t know the difference.”<sup>280</sup>

Penny achieves empowerment through the reclaiming of control over her sexual appetite. Palahniuk does not deny women their right to sexual expression and pleasure — Penny is seen to masturbate, not with a dildo which remains to be a tool of patriarchal power over women, but her own hand: “Self-improvement is masturbation.”<sup>281</sup> As Jensen states in his critique of power in pornography, “any power that women held was almost always derived from their bodies, their ability to perform sexually.”<sup>282</sup> The protagonist feels intense pride in taking part in the testing process of the Beautiful You line, even if her involvement was purely physical. Maxwell further mocks Penny’s involvement, revealing the full extent of her contribution: “It was one thing to discuss the testing process using lofty verbal

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>279</sup> Green, “Consent Isn’t Enough.”

<sup>280</sup> Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*, 73-4.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>282</sup> Dines, Jensen and Russo, *Pornography*, 92.

legalese, but to actually see Penny wallowing, near-insane with wild animalistic release... spitting vulgar obscenities... she didn't look like a dedicated, hardworking scientist."<sup>283</sup> It is Maxwell that was ultimately the 'brains' behind the whole endeavour, reaffirming normative gender roles and hierarchies. Penny's only purpose is as a test dummy, promoting the feminine ideal of "a virgin with no legs to leave, no arms to hold me, no head to talk to me."<sup>284</sup> The men in *Beautiful You* attempt to diminish female sexual power and regulate how female sexuality is perceived, as either one of two extremes: victims of rape, or sexualized nymphomaniacs. As the power of men in *Beautiful You* is called into question, men work to reassert their power — one scene shows Brillstein, Penny's boss, humiliated and manipulated by Penny, as she uses her sexuality to get information out of him for her trial: "'Tell me!' she demanded, driving her hips upward to keep him well inside her vaginal torture chamber. 'Tell me what Maxwell is doing!'... Brillstein howled."<sup>285</sup> As seen above, during the trial, Penny is portrayed not as the empowered scientist she was hoping to project, but perpetuates the myth of the nymphomaniac (all of which is Brillstein's doing). Female representation in media, as seen here, is a construct of male power and dominance. However, as will be discussed below, Penny comes to define her own sexuality, on her own terms.

Pornography, by nature, is completely divorced from intimacy and affection. Although the scenes are incredibly graphic and visceral, Palahniuk describes each encounter with unnerving precision: "Maxwell's eyes had a glazed, faraway look, not focused on anything. Through his hand, he was clearly exploring a hidden world. 'This, I believe, is your cervix,' he said. 'If I apply a steady pressure...'"<sup>286</sup> Such passages remind us of the long history of pornography, "a gender-specific genre produced primarily by and for men but

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<sup>283</sup> Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*, 136.

<sup>284</sup> Gubar, "Representing Pornography," 722.

<sup>285</sup> Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*, 142.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.



focused obsessively on the female figure.”<sup>287</sup> The masculine character, as depicted in pornography, is often devoid of any real personality, whose value is derived solely from his possession of a phallus. This is true of *Beautiful You*, in that it is only the bodies of women that are exposed and made vulnerable to the gaze. Pornography comes down to “bodily fragmentation,” objectification and submission.<sup>288</sup> Penny has inadvertently been dismembered and disassembled, our protagonist fractured into segments — namely, her breasts and genitals. Penny has been reduced to the sexual body, “merely an articulated genital organ”:<sup>289</sup> “Look at yourself. You have a textbook vagina. Your labia major are exactly symmetrical. Your perianal ridge is magnificent. Your frenulum clitoridis and fourchette... Biologically speaking, men treasure such uniformity.”<sup>290</sup> Palahniuk fetishises Penny, as he provides uncomfortable detail as to her genitalia and removes her sense of humanity altogether. The male body is all but absent from the scene, as Palahniuk tracks what is of interest to Maxwell, and therefore the male reader by extension. However, the act of sex in the novel, unlike in normative pornography, is not necessarily male-centred — as stated in *Pornography: The Production and Consumption of Inequality*, “sex was marked by the rise and fall of the penis.”<sup>291</sup> Penny does not rely on a man to reach orgasm — Palahniuk’s novel constructs a world whereby women can be entirely self-reliant: “The generations of females trained too long to look for insults and injustice, Penny would pummel them with joy and drive them to accept happiness... With stealthy, subtle manipulation of their pleasure centres, she’d gently bully them into achieving their full erotic potential.”<sup>292</sup> Palahniuk here subverts the traditional narrative that runs throughout pornography, whereby women are inherently subservient to the desires of the man.

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<sup>287</sup> Gubar, “Representing Pornography,” 713.

<sup>288</sup> Dines, Jensen and Russo, *Pornography*, 66.

<sup>289</sup> Gubar, “Representing Pornography,” 722.

<sup>290</sup> Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*, 48.

<sup>291</sup> Dines, Jensen and Russo, *Pornography*, 73.

<sup>292</sup> Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*, 221.

Baba Gray-Beard, “sculpted of bones and tendons, a knotted tangle of dried muscles and grey hairs,” acts in strong contrast to the clinical, scientific nature of Maxwell.<sup>293</sup> The Baba is a sex witch who trains Penny in the ways of sex magic and female pleasure. Palahniuk essentially establishes motherhood, love and redemption in the figure of an old hag: “The Baba proudly tapped a wizened fingertips on the cracked skin of her own chest. The constant tug of dry, icy winds had stretched her breasts until they flapped like leathery dugs. Without hesitating in her caresses, the hag lifted the same bent finger toward Penny. Inserting just the gnarled tip..., she said, ‘Little one, your vagina is so juicy!’”<sup>294</sup> The popular notion of the hag is a woman that lives alone, holds folk wisdom and remedies women in the ways of fertility: “Nonetheless their age conferred on them the aspect of the wise woman imbued with occult knowledge.”<sup>295</sup> The Baba allows Penny to emancipate herself from masculine constructs of sexual pleasure, by being responsible for her own sexuality. Her character essentially acts as a parody of the old, wise mentor, a classic trope seen in film and fiction such as Mr Miyagi in *The Karate Kid*, and even Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada*, but taken to the extreme and absurd.

The Baba’s age and physical appearance are disarming, in the sense that vulnerable women may trust her where they wouldn’t trust a man. In this sense, the Baba could be representative of a different form of seduction, more exploitative and enabling of the patriarchy: “Penny knew she had no choice. Her mother and her best friend might be dying... Slowly she slipped off her Christian Louboutin shoes.”<sup>296</sup> The New York Times published an article on female exploitation by the pornography industry: “Amberlyn Clark testified that she worked for Girls Do Porn as a reference for young women, a role that included misleading recruits. Ms. Clark said that she was paid to deceive prospective performers, and

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>295</sup> Edwards, “Folklore of the Hag and Crone.”

<sup>296</sup> Palahniuk, *Beautiful You*, 154.

to assure them the videos would never be posted online.”<sup>297</sup> Furthermore, women’s involvement in human sex trafficking has also been proven: “In the process of prosecuting human traffickers, female perpetrators are usually seen as an assistant or victim. However, there are indications that they have a more prominent role than is assumed.”<sup>298</sup> Wijkman and Kleeman’s research on female involvement in human sex trafficking found that of the 138 cases studies, 94 cases (68%) were perpetrated by women.<sup>299</sup> The character of the Baba, I argue, is used as a device to explore the complexity of women and feminism. Not only is it the case that not all women are feminists, but some women actively work against the feminist cause.

Although Palahniuk is navigating a genre, pornography, that relies on the disempowerment of women, *Beautiful You* is essentially critiquing female sexual representation in media. His novel explores the complexities of feminism, as women work to negotiate their role within a strictly patriarchal society. Palahniuk is criticising the imbedded script that runs throughout some forms of pornography, that is, women as subservient and men as naturally entitled to women (as myth and fantasy). Palahniuk’s novel does not present Penny engaging in pornography itself, but rather is making a statement that the power structures that exist in pornographic videos are recognisable in real life. The themes of rape and pornography are not used solely to disgust and shock readers, even if they are contentious, but highlight issues pertinent to modern society.

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<sup>297</sup> Van Syckle, “22 Women Say They Were Exploited.”

<sup>298</sup> Wijkman and Kleemans, “Female Offenders of human trafficking,” 57.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

## Conclusion

This thesis has explored whether American novelist Chuck Palahniuk's primary aim is to shock and disgust his readers with taboo subjects for mere sensationalism, or whether he utilises these devices to challenge his reader's assumptions about ideas of difference, sexuality and gender.

Examining four of Palahniuk's novels, *Fight Club* (1996), *Invisible Monsters Remix* (1999), *Haunted* (2005) and *Beautiful You* (2014), I considered the ways in which Palahniuk's fiction seeks to shock and disgust his readers. Themes of desire, sexuality and identity and the relationship between sex, patriarchal culture and violence were explored to demonstrate how Palahniuk elicits these responses. Palahniuk goes further by using offensive humour, crude language, and horrific imagery to push the boundaries of decency and interrogate social norms.

I have suggested that Palahniuk is not simply an *enfant terrible* for the sake of provoking and outraging his readership. Rather, he uses disgust and shock to provoke his readers into making judgements about his characters, and to subvert readers' expectations. By creating characters that are superficially disgusting, Palahniuk forces the reader to reflect on their own biases and sensibilities.

In Chapter One of my thesis, *Disgust and Shock*, I examined the concepts of disgust and shock, as the main devices Palahniuk uses to promote an affective response from the reader. Palahniuk's novels essentially make readers consider their desire for perverse and violent narratives, with his predisposition for body horror and a reliance on taboo themes.

Chapter Two, *Embodiment and Monstrosity*, explored the nature of difference, as presented on the body through deformity, disability and transgender surgery/extreme body modification. Although Palahniuk presents characters that are models of monstrosity and

otherness, he invariably undermines attitudes towards difference by presenting his characters as sympathetic and more than their appearance.

Chapter Three, *Homoeroticism and Masculinity*, examined gender norms and hierarchies. Palahniuk provokes his readers to question their attitudes and biases toward historically marginalised forms of sexuality, such as homosexuality, and the social pressures attached to conventional ideals of masculinity.

Chapter Four, *Rape and Pornography*, critiqued concepts of patriarchy, sexual violence and female sexuality. I argued that Palahniuk subverts the imbedded script that runs throughout pornography that promotes female disempowerment and humiliation.

I have sought in this project to expand the conversation about the nature and effects of Palahniuk's fiction. I have suggested that his work functions as social satire and commentary, rather than exclusively adolescent shock writing. As such, I believe his oeuvre is worthy of more serious and sustained critical attention.

I have studied only four of Palahniuk's twenty-one novels. His other novels delve into a number of other social issues. For example, one of Palahniuk more recent novels, *Adjustment Day* (2019), examines the current political climate, the class divide and the nature of the American psyche, but, as readers would expect, it is executed in his usual darkly humorous, deliberately absurd and confrontational style. Although Palahniuk's subject matter has evolved and changed in line with the contemporary social and political context, his use of disgust and shock remains a constant.

My thesis has explored the nature of literariness and literary value. Popular culture novels, such as Palahniuk's, are often criticised for being superficial, and having no higher value — his novels are often received with mixed reviews. Further work to explore why confrontational, provocative works such as his are arguably misunderstood and dismissed

could be undertaken. The critical question is whether polarisation is an inherent and inevitable effect of provocative art or an indicator of literary worth.

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