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SELF-DESTRUCTION IN THE WORKS OF CHUCK PALAHNIUK

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Bc. Tereza Lieders

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Anotace

Tématem předkládané diplomové práce je fenomén sebezničení v dílech amerického autora Chucka Palahniuka, který se ve svých dílech hojně zabývá rozpadem soudobé společnosti. Sebezničení, které často popisuje velmi explicitně, je v jeho pojetí vyobrazeno jako způsob občanské neposlušnosti a vyrovnání se se společenskými a osobními problémy. První část práce se věnuje důležitosti občanské neposlušnosti v americké kultuře a tématu násilí, které tamní literatura také zpracovává. Další část se zabývá transgresivní fikcí, se kterou bývá Palahniukovo jméno často spojováno. Následuje shrnutí tvorby tohoto autora. Práce v neposlední řadě zkoumá fenomén sebezničení ve vybraných Palahniukových dílech a analyzuje úlohu tohoto motivu v jednotlivých příbězích.

Klíčová slova

Chuck Palahniuk, transgresivní fikce, sebezničení, občanská neposlušnost, násilí

Abstract

The topic of the following MA thesis is the theme of self-destruction in the works of Chuck Palahniuk, an American author whose novels frequently deal with the disintegration of contemporary society. Self-destruction, which the author often describes in violent details, is in his works portrayed as a form of civil disobedience and as a tool for dealing with social and personal problems. The first section of the thesis will explore the legacy of civil disobedience in American culture as well as violence as a recurring motif in US literature. The next section deals with transgressive fiction, a type of literature Palahniuk is frequently connected to, followed by an overview of his literary output. The last part of the thesis further explores some of his novels and the role self-destruction plays in them.

Key Words

Chuck Palahniuk, transgressive fiction, self-destruction, civil disobedience, violence

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1 Introduction

When reading Chuck Palahniuk, readers enter a world of curious plots, distorted narratives, and twisted characters whose depressing opinions are trumped only by their bleak life prospects. A feeling that yet another violent incident awaits on the next page only intensifies with the increasing page count. Despite this, Palahniuk's fiction still attracts many readers. This might be due to the fact that the bleakness of his novels is not total. A sense of lightness and optimism still shines through the gloom and destruction, however faint it is. One of the reasons for this is Palahniuk's treatment of the topic of self-destruction, which is a subject the author frequently explores in his books. This thesis will argue that the self-destruction presented in his works has a redeeming quality. No matter how many times a character intentionally harms himself or deliberately puts himself in danger, the effect is never as tragic as one expects it to be. These characters treat self-destruction as something more than just a path to annihilation; for them, it's a way to assert themselves as individuals and to reclaim their life.

Literature as an art form has always mirrored the social and cultural environment of a particular culture. The aim of this thesis is to trace the cultural influences that lead Palahniuk and some of his contemporaries to exploring the topics of violence and self-destruction and presenting their positive side. This paper will argue that civil disobedience and violence stand at the very center of the American literary tradition and are also among the main forces that influence Palahniuk's writing.

The first part of this work will focus on the concept of civil disobedience and its importance in the inception of the United States. The basis of American identity was shaped during the Revolutionary Period, a time when the colonial nation finally rebelled against the increasingly oppressive demands of the British rule. In the 19th century, the perception of Americans as being a community of strong-willed and brave individuals was intensified in the writings of the Transcendentalists. This optimism however slowly faded due to various cultural and political shifts, and by the later decades of the 20th century, it was almost entirely replaced with a sense of dissatisfaction and distrust of society.

In the next section of the thesis, we will discuss the importance of violence in American culture and its reflection in literary works. Due to the ferocious conquest of

the continent, the United States is a country whose development is closely linked with violence. This fact of course permeates local literature. This tradition, coupled with the existential angst of the late 20th century, is what informs a lot of Palahniuk's fiction.

The topic of transgressive fiction will also be discussed in this thesis. Transgression as a literary phenomenon has been used in literature almost since its beginning. However, it came to the forefront in the second half of the 20th century because, for many writers, this form of literary expression fit the attitudes of the time. Transgressing the established limits of social and cultural expectations was the only way they could truly convey the feelings of dissatisfaction they felt. Chuck Palahniuk is one of the authors that is often linked to transgressive fiction, we will therefore explore his connection with this type of writing.

An analysis of a selection of Palahniuk's novels will form the last part of this thesis, especially their portrayal of self-destruction. We will trace the author's treatment of the topic and compare its function in several of his books. This will be done through close reading of the texts as well as by examining secondary sources.

2 The role of civil disobedience in American literature

Displaying dissatisfaction with the prevailing political and social climate through writing is an indelible part of literature as a whole and the practice is significantly rooted in the American literary tradition. This can be traced back to writers of the Revolutionary Period who, by also being hugely prominent in establishing America's political tradition, helped to create the mythos of what it means to be American. As Richard Gray states in his book *A Brief History of American Literature*, writers of the Revolutionary Period like Benjamin Franklin embodied "the new Spirit of America" which in its essence combined the moral principles of Puritanism with the emphasis on rationality and individual freedom prioritized by thinkers of the Enlightenment (Gray 23). Writing of the era of course served largely as a reaction to the British colonial oppression. What it meant to be American was then to stand one's ground and confront the governing forces that one disagrees with. It was to create one's own destiny if the prospects a person was confronted with didn't match the expectations. Dubbed later as the American Dream, this approach to life suggests unlimited possibilities an American citizen can explore in his or her life.

Many writers of the Revolutionary Period tried to concretely define what it meant to be American and who exactly is this new breed of man. In spite of being more of an outsider due to his French citizenship and Tory leanings, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur aimed to do just that in his fictional epistolary narrative *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). In his view, an American is a man of an independent spirit who has to face unfamiliar circumstances of a new continent and has a chance to live life on his own terms: "the American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions" (Crèvecoeur 608). *Letters* paints America as a land of renewal and infinite possibilities where the oppressed that left Europe can find the opportunity to begin again and in better circumstances. In Crèvecoeur's view, Europe with its political constrains and decaying culture cannot compare to the abundance of possibilities the new continent has to offer (Gray 27). According to Gray, it was Benjamin Franklin, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States himself, who formulated one of the first descriptions of the American Dream (Gray 24). In *Autobiography* (1791), Franklin gives an account of his humble beginnings and how he arrived to a "State of Affluence and some Degree of Reputation

in the World" (Franklin 481) which, as he suggests, is fit to be emulated by anyone who wants to achieve similar goals in life. *Autobiography* suggests that a person holds the key to his or her own success in life through hard work and self-reinvention, or as Gray puts it – "the individual could change, improve, and even recreate himself, with the help of reason, common sense, and hard work" (Gray 24). Another man integral to America's Revolutionary movement, Thomas Jefferson, holds a similar view on taking responsibility for one's own way in life. In his 1774 treatise *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, he applies this attitude to the whole nation when he states that Americans had freed themselves from the British rule by employing "a right which nature has given to all men, of departing from the country in which chance, not choice, has placed them" (Jefferson 65). Both Franklin and Jefferson were essential to the American Revolution, and self-help and self-reinvention was a fundamental part of establishing the nation (Gray 25). However, it is Jefferson who created a substantial part of the Declaration of Independence even though the founding document of the United States had many co-authors and went through several drafts. The Declaration describes an attainable possibility – it paints a picture of an "idea of the nation, an ideal or possibility against which its actual social practices can and must be measured – and, it might well be, found wanting" (Gray 29). Standing up to a defunct government is actually a right and a duty of an American citizen. This attitude of individuality and nonconformism can be perceived in every aspect of American culture even now, although it rather seems to have lost its edge throughout time.

In the 19th century, the spirit of nonconformism was prominent in the writing of Transcendentalist authors. Even though they didn't form a homogeneous movement, the main aspects of their works highlighted the importance of anti-institutionalism, free will, and independent thinking. The following excerpt comes from the 1836 seminal essay "Nature" written by one of the most prominent Transcendentalist authors, Ralph Waldo Emerson:

> Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry

and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? (3)

In these six sentences Emerson encapsulates everything that most Transcendentalist writers stand for: that it is necessary to question thoughts and concepts inherited and taken for granted by previous generations and build new ones instead of those that are no longer serving their purpose. Only in this way can a person live authentically. Emerson's take on individualism had an immense influence on a variety of subsequent American artists raging from Emily Dickinson to Theodore Dreisser (Baym 211). His views also left a great impression on his contemporary Henry David Thoreau, another prominent Transcendentalist, who "provoked generations of readers to contemplate their obligations to society, nature, and themselves" (Baym 961). Apart from inspiring readers to think and live independently, he emphasized the importance of citizens being disobedient towards a government that fails to fulfill its function. In his 1849 essay "Resistance to Civil Government", he proclaimed it a duty for citizens to oppose a government they feel is unjust even though it might constitute breaking a law: "Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn" (970). We can observe that the Transcendentalists shared similar attitudes with the Revolutionary writers, who were instrumental in establishing the country's political and social system. It is interesting that in the relatively short time that elapsed from 1776 to the middle of the 19th century this system created conditions which the new generation felt the need to object to. This fact reminds us that governing institutions have a tendency to get into an established routine rather quickly, no matter how revolutionary their creation was in the first place. However, it seems – at least from the literary output of Transcendentalist writers – that in the 19th century citizens still had a say in the way their country is being governed. True or not, this optimistic attitude seems to have disappeared throughout the course of the 20th century. As a result, the literary works created in the late 1900s differ from the type of indignation American authors once felt.

It can be expected that with a rapidly changing world, the manifestation of dissatisfaction with the status quo is going to evolve. In *American Dream, American Nightmare*, Kathryn Hume investigates how criticism of politics and society changed

around the final decades of the 20th century. In the first half of the century, the prevailing view of the governing institutions was still quite positive, despite the fact that the US citizens suffered through the Great Depression and two World Wars. One of the reasons for their contentment was possibly the era of prosperity that came after WWII. And ideologically, the overall view of politicians and their motives was still predominantly positive. It was a time before events like the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the JFK assassination "damaged the politician's ability to proclaim the good intentions of [the US] government at home or abroad" and revealed that the cultural innocence of previous decades was lost for good (Hume 41). That is not to say that everyone was satisfied with the political system back then, but the people complaining usually belonged to marginalized groups of mostly non-middle-class, non-white citizens. The overwhelming majority still believed in the idea of the country's continual progress despite the system's shortcomings (Hume 6). Hume translates this situation to the context of literature when she writes that "[i]*n The Naked and the Dead*, Norman Mailer may worry about the ineffectuality of the liberal response to reality, but he does not doubt that World War II should be fought or that America should win" (6). There was certainly always corruption, crime, and discrimination in the American society but it was largely seen as correctable, it wasn't perceived as being deeply rooted at a systemic level. But by the late 1960s the distrust of the government was intensifying. The wave of revolts of the decade didn't deliver quite the change it promised, the protesters' dissatisfaction however didn't disappear, and they carried their skepticism with them. With no end in sight, the Vietnam War was quickly losing its supporters. Not even popular culture and consumerism presented answers to life's burning questions. What's more, society wasn't moving towards general prosperity, peace, and understanding, it actually seemed to be getting away from it. By the end of the millennium, the idea that children will lead more prosperous lives than their parents – who often sacrificed their own comfort to secure the well-being of their offspring – was no longer true (Hume 4). Finally, the mainstream had caught up with the minority voices that saw the fundamental problems with the way the country is being run. As Hume writes: "[t]he central solidity and rightness of what had once been America is gone" (6). The last decades of the 20th century saw a disintegration of the American Dream accompanied by the disillusionment with its grand promises (Hume 6).

Hume argues that because the idea of progress and stability was so ingrained in American culture, it left a big void in the expectations of its citizens. Naturally, literature came to be one of the avenues through which people could cope with this disillusionment. Philip Roth, a 20th century author who didn't shy away from portraying the harsher side of the American Dream, has shrewdly observed the limitations US writers battle against when trying to write about American culture in his 1961 essay "Writing American Fiction":

> [T]he American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make credible much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.

In other words, it's hard to describe a reality which seems chaotic and arbitrary. Roth quotes the cultural critic Benjamin DeMott who wrote that the "deeply lodged suspicion of the times [is] namely, that events and individuals are unreal, and that power to alter the course of the age, of my life and your life, is actually vested nowhere" (qtd. in Roth), a sentiment with which Roth aligns himself. An increasing number of writers was incorporating this anxiety into their works by the end of the century (Hume 6). Because this new reality of life felt so hopeless and stifling, these writers had to come up with new and outrageous ways to demonstrate their disgust with it.

This also applies to Chuck Palahniuk's writing, especially his early novels whose protagonists are so disillusioned with the mainstream culture and their unchanging positions in it, they resort to desperate and oftentimes shocking solutions to break through it. Eduardo Mendieta calls Palahniuk's novels "Bildungsroman[s] of an American hero but told in reverse" (395) and the actions of his characters mere "attempts at surviving American culture" (395). His use of the word "surviving" seems counter-intuitive because their effort to isolate themselves from society usually takes a form of total annihilation of their own identity, both mentally and physically. However, Palahniuk clearly sees destruction as the only way out; in his view, in an irredeemably

flawed society, destruction is more productive than creation. The cultural and political system is broken beyond repair and even the type of cultural disobedience Thoreau promoted can no longer help because the Transcendentalist writer still operated within the framework of the established political structures. Palahniuk suggests that the governing institutions of the late 20th century have become so powerful and rigid that only a complete separation can truly free an individual. Hume describes similar novels as stories in which “respected institutions prove to be false fronts for unsavory interests” (175) – which, as we have argued in previous paragraphs, is a feeling that became prevalent around the end of the century. Mendieta echoes this statement when he writes that a “profound suspicion of the system, of societal good intentions” (407) can be found in Palahniuk’s work. This feeling of desperation (and, one could argue, paranoia) is so complete that any kind of concern the culture seems to show for the well-being of individuals is understood as just another way in which institutions aim to strengthen their power over them (Mendieta 407). As was stated before, Palahniuk’s books often show characters rebelling against the established political and social order in various ways, however, the themes of violence and self-destruction are arguably the most prominent of them.

3 The theme of violence in American literature

Like the concept of the American Dream, the theme of violence forms an integral part of the American literary expression. In his book *The Spaces of Violence*, James R. Giles argues that through the depiction of violence in the United States we can gleam the troubled reality of American society (1). Giles goes back to the very beginning of literature written on the continent and reminds us that some of the oldest kinds of writing are slave and captivity narratives, which are by their very nature violent. He extends the time line of canonical writers who often explored this theme with 19th century authors like James Fenimore Cooper and his depictions of cruelty that accompanied the life at the Frontier, the themes of anger and revenge in Herman Melville's works, and the topic of violence and guilt Edgar Allan Poe often examined. From the 20th century he highlights Ernest Hemingway's fascination with war, William Faulkner's focus on describing the gritty reality of the American South (here we should also mention the works of Flannery O'Connor), and Norman Mailer's vision of violence as being an integral component of male identity. Interestingly, Giles also makes a connection to F. Scott Fitzgerald – even though his stories do not primarily concentrate on violence, they investigate "the brutal and dehumanizing nature of American urban life", reminding us that traumatizing violence doesn't have to come in the shape of a physical assault (Giles 1).

One of these names and the literary movement he is connected to warrant a further discussion because the legacy of these authors is frequently reflected in the works of Palahniuk and his contemporaries. Edgar Allan Poe belongs to a group of American writers who were influenced by the European Gothic tradition. What results from this fusion of cultures are novels who have many of the features of a Gothic novel but are firmly set in America, both in terms of culture and geography (even though the typical setting of Gothic novels usually features haunted castles of the Old World). Apart from Poe and his stories of murdering madmen, other representatives of this literary tradition are Washington Irving (who is now probably most famous for his short story "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820)) and Charles Brockden Brown, who was one of the first authors to bring the Gothic sensibility to the new continent. Brown wrote a series of books (for example *Wieland; or, The Transformation* (1798) or *Edgar Huntly, or, Memoirs of a Sleep-walker* (1799)) which, according to Gray, "translate the

Gothic into an American idiom and … combine sensational elements such as murder, insanity, sexual aggression, and preternatural events with brooding explorations of social, political, and philosophical questions" (44). Interestingly, these attributes could be very well used when describing Chuck Palahniuk and other late 20th century authors who explore similar topics. The next statement Gray makes about Brown's works also could be applied to some of contemporary fiction: "[t]hese books also make art out of the indeterminate: the reader is left at the end with the queer feeling that there is little, perhaps nothing, a person can trust – least of all, the evidence of their senses" (Gray 44). This distrust of a person's perceived reality is a prominent feature of Palahniuk's novels and is something a lot of literary works from the second half of the 20th century have in common. It is surprising that Brown didn't gain more recognition for his writing given that his works anticipate much of what was to come in the 19th century. According to Gray, Brown's novels "look back to the founding beliefs of the early republic and the founding patterns of the early novel. They also look forward to a more uncertain age, when writers were forced to negotiate a whole series of crises, including the profound moral, social, and political crisis that was to eventuate in civil war" (Gray 45).

Having ended the last paragraph with the word "war" brings us to another point that is important to mention when discussing violence in American literature – that the obsession of American writers with the development and consequences of violence is not surprising given the fact that the whole history of the United States is downright bloody. After all, institutionalized violence linked to slavery and sanctions against Native tribes form an indelible part of the very conception of the country (Giles 1). Although many of the writers of the Revolutionary Period didn't regard the oppression of marginalized groups as a major problem, some of them were concerned about it – for example the aforementioned Crèvecoeur and Jefferson both acknowledged the problems and hoped these practices would be remedied (Gray 30). The fights against Native tribes were later followed by the violent Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and the wars of the 20th century. All the wars the U.S. participated in during the last century have, according to Giles, "continued and intensified the national legacy of violence" (1). The same could probably be said of the highly publicized political assassinations of the 1960s.

Lately, however, violence in the public sphere seems to have changed; Giles asserts that with the rise of terrorist attacks and public shootings in the last decades, American society seems to face day-to-day violence even more often. Moreover, these acts of aggression now frequently occur in places that have always been deemed safe (Giles 1). Acts of violence moved into middle-class, non-urban spaces that were before thought of as peaceful, at least when it came to acts of open, public brutality, not the kind of violence that might take place behind closed doors. What is maybe even more shocking to the inhabitants of these formerly safe spaces is that the perpetrators are frequently people like them, not members of lower classes or minority racial groups – simply put, these attacks aren't carried out by "the Other" (Giles 10). This fact makes the mainstream society seem even more out of balance.

Of course that violence is a universal theme that has been explored in art of all cultures and it has been a central theme in the US since the country's origin, but Giles argues that contemporary American writers seem to be obsessed with it even more (Giles 2). Exploring the theme of violence through literature is a way to confront and cope with it for both readers and writers. Readers who experience mediated violence go through catharsis and they can in a way come to terms with it. It needs to be noted that even though violence started to become ubiquitous, it is a phenomenon that is still hard to understand because, paradoxically, "the more familiar violence becomes, the less its origins and essential nature seem comprehensible" (Giles 10).

A late 20th century author that shocked audiences with his portrayal of commonplace, matter-of-fact violence was Bret Easton Ellis. His 1991 novel *American Psycho* had gained such infamy even before its release that it briefly looked it wouldn't be published at all. The novel tells the bizarre story of Patrick Bateman, a wealthy Wall Street broker, who enjoys torturing and killing people in his spare time. Although Bateman's escapades are portrayed in gory details, the style of the novel is maybe even more surprising than the graphic brutality. It is told in an unmediated first-person narrative, all descriptions are written in a desensitized fashion, and the action is mostly overshadowed by tedious lists of everyday products that the narcissistic and materialistic Bateman owns and by his laughable attempts at art criticism. The writing doesn't really change throughout the book no matter what scene is being portrayed, so the assaults the protagonist commits are written in the same disinterested style as the

description of his morning grooming ritual, which suggests that Bateman regards his victims as mere inanimate objects. The novel was called misogynistic, gory, and – maybe worst of all – boring. However, the excessive controversy surrounding it upon its release was in hindsight mostly caused by a total misunderstanding of the book's subtext. The outrage over the novel's violence is especially surprising given that stories of serial killers are very popular in American culture. According to Carla Freccero and her essay titled "Historical Violence, Censorship, and the Serial Killer: The Case of 'American Psycho'", these narratives are so popular because serial killers are the perfect scapegoat for all the horrible things that happen in the world (48). They are seen as individual deviants; they embody evil that gets symbolically eradicated when they are captured and punished – and in these stories, they always get caught (Freccero 48). But Patrick Bateman is never punished and, what is more, the author never explicitly judges the protagonist's actions. This lack of a moral compass is probably what shocked audiences the most. What escaped the incensed readers is the absurdity of the narrative – not only does the protagonist evade punishment, the story also gets increasingly more improbable and inconsistent as it unfolds. By the end it starts to be evident that Bateman is an unreliable narrator and his account of the story might be partly, if not completely, fictitious. Ellis himself said that he himself doesn't know if Bateman only made up his crimes and thinks it's probably better that we don't know. Ultimately, if Bateman really committed these heinous murders or not is beside the point (Hume 192). The important thing (which the angry critics and audiences largely seem to have ignored) is the fact that the story is not to be taken so literally. Patrick Bateman is not supposed to be an individual degenerate who literally gets away with murder. When reading the novel now, Bateman's ruthlessness, greed, and extreme egotism are clearly supposed to represent the white corporate America. But the idea of a book that could be so blatantly violent and at the same time so blasé about it was so novel at the time that readers didn't know how to approach it. It is easy to scoff at these misguided critics now, when the style of writing Ellis uses is more mainstream. Ellis himself was very surprised by the wave of criticism aimed at him and his novel. His intention was "to expose the deeply brutal and misogynistic workings of yuppie greed, as well as its unconscious links (by way of denial and racial scapegoating) to the ubiquitousness of violent crime in the United States" (Redding 218). He just chose an unusual way of expressing his concerns

in writing. Palahniuk's works are also often criticized solely for their apparent, often shocking features. These two authors are frequently grouped in the loosely defined style of writing called transgressive fiction. We will explore the term, its definition, and how it relates to the theme of violence and self-destruction in the next chapter.

4 Transgressive fiction

To find the ultimate definition of the term transgressive fiction is deceptively hard. The Oxford Learner's dictionary defines the word "transgression" as an "act that goes beyond the limits of what is morally or legally acceptable" ("Transgression"). From this definition, we can infer that transgressive novels depict actions and thoughts that stretch the idea of what is appropriate to write about in terms of social and political sensibilities. In *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection, and the Carnivalesque,* M. Keith Booker describes transgressive writing as a "tendency to break rules, transgress boundaries, destabilize hierarchies, and question authority of various kinds" (5). Moreover, transgressive fiction often appears to be nihilistic or sarcastic because it presents a story from a seemingly matter-of-fact stance, or as Robin Mookerjee describes it in his book *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition,* these authors treat "flashpoint subjects without taking any kind of moral stand and treat bizarre behavior as if it were absolutely normal" (2).

There has been a debate concerning the question if transgressive fiction can be regarded as a separate genre. Though in her essay "The Lacuna of Usefulness: The Compulsion to 'Understand' Transgressive Fiction" Molly Hoey writes that transgressive fiction "emerged as a recognizable genre during the 1990s" (26), she immediately goes back on her assertion and tries to investigates if it's even possible to call it a bona fide genre. And as we are going to see in this chapter, she is right to do so. Hoey mentions definitions offered by both Booker and Mookerjee. Neither of them views transgressive fiction as being able to be described as a separate genre. Mookerjee views transgressive fiction as "a technique, rather than the basis of a genre" and Booker sees it as a "form of social commentary" (Hoey 27). And if we try to identify what novels are generally called transgressive, we can see that they are often very different in terms of genre. An internet search of the term "transgressive fiction" offers dozens of articles and blog posts with lists of novels the author of the page deems to be transgressive. These varied lists range from classics like Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*, Golding's classroom favorite *Lord of the Flies*, and Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis* continuing with what seems like the entire bibliographies of Ellis and Palahniuk and ending with Gillian Flynn's recent best-seller *Gone Girl*. What most of these books

have in common is a certain mind-bending shock value but other than that it would be pointless to compare them in scope or genre.

Having discussed the definition of transgressive fiction, another question is in order – what exactly does transgressive writing oppose and what limits does it cross, and how? This cannot be answered as easily as it might appear. Mookerjee rightly asserts that given the unclear way transgressive fiction is defined, this ambiguity bleeds into the boundaries it tries to transgress: "Since transgression literally means to cross lines or boundaries, it may be understood differently depending on one's sense of the social norms violated" (Mookerjee 16). Generally speaking, we can say that transgressive fiction often portrays illegal activities, extreme violence, and sexual deviation. However, those are rather vague terms, transgression is really more dependent on the context and the reader than it is on a specific worldview. This uncertainty gives us even more clues when trying to decide if transgressive writing can be taken as a stand-alone genre. The ambiguous nature of its characteristics might be one of the reasons why lots of transgressive novels are misunderstood, are often only discussed in terms of their shock value, and sometimes not being discussed at all.

Transgressive fiction is simply very hard to define properly and it might be even trickier to distinguish with certainty which works are transgressive and which are not. One of the obstacles to this is also the fact that transgression is hardly a new concept in literature. Booker discusses the possibility of defining transgressive fiction:

> Clearly, the question of transgression in literature is difficult and complex, dealing with the function and purpose of literature, the impact of ideas upon institutions, and the interactions between culture and politics. This situation is made all the more arduous by the difficulty in even defining transgression. After all, even the most transgressive works of literature do not in general immediately send their readers into the streets carrying banners and shouting slogans. Transgressive literature works more subtly, by gradually chipping away at certain modes of thinking that contribute to the perpetuation of oppressive political structures. (4)

When discussing the function transgressive fiction has, Booker wonders if it can serve as motivation for people who look for themes of political activism in literature, in other words to “equip us to effect transgressions in the real world” (5). However, he also sees another possible outcome of this kind of fiction – what if it has the opposite effect and simply conditions us to see social injustice as something inherent in our society? What if transgressive novels normalize inequality? It might also rob radically thinking people of the possible subversive inclinations they might have. In this way, readers can vent their frustrations when consuming literature and then they don’t feel like they have to fight them in the real world anymore (Booker 5). The answer to these questions seems to be ambiguous yet again: the effects transgressive fiction has on its readers probably differs from novel to novel.

In his book, Mookerjee maps out the history of transgression in literature. Overall, he concentrates on its satiric tradition and thanks to that he regards transgressive fiction we know today as a descendant of the Menippean satire of Ovid (Mookerjee 6). He traces a line that goes all the way to today’s transgressive literature. However, he in no way implies that Ovid’s plays can be included in the same genre as the transgressive fiction that started to emerge in the 1980s and ’90s because – as we have discussed – what is considered transgressive changes so dramatically between historical eras and heavily relies on the reception of the readers. He adds: “It is therefore implausible that contemporary transgressive novels have much in common … with classical mock epic such as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and the claim that they belong to a single ‘genre’ is equally dubious” (Mookerjee 15). Drawing a connection between these works merely helps him to establish that the satiric tendency of transgressive literature is fundamental to its understanding. This is because transgressive satire differs so widely from the more traditional “simple satire”, which he defines as being very noticeably intertextual – it is traditionally seen as attacking a particular person or text and it rarely “rises above commentary on its subject” (18). He describes the transgressional, or Menippean, satire as being “voiced from a generally elusive author and imitating or mocking a range of beliefs, character types, social norms, institutions, and modes of speech”. This kind of satire doesn’t “fit a formulaic description of its purpose” even though it uses techniques typical of satire (18). Like a lot of other postmodern works, contemporary transgressive fiction often uses the intertextual device

of pastiche where a text or a style of a previous author is imitated but not for a satiric or comedic purpose – in this way it differs from a parody ("pastiche"). Mookerjee doesn't say that Menippean satire doesn't rely on older texts, quite the contrary. But even though authors of this kind of satire often base their works on different forms or texts, they use them "as a platform for more inclusive mockery" (18). In contrast, "simple satire" doesn't go beyond commenting on the immediate subject it criticizes (18). Another interesting point Mookerjee raises is the correlation of transgression in literature with a political instability of a given society, he says that it's an "aggressive form that arises in times perceived as permanently unstable" (18). This goes back to transgressive fiction being regarded as having a comeback in the unpredictable times of the late 20th century when "transgression has been adopted as an 'official' mode of literary discourse" (Booker 3).

Mookerje moves from Ovid and marks Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* and Nabokov's *Lolita* as modern precursors of the transgressive fiction of recent years. He actually calls them the first transgressive novels because they "lead with their 'offensiveness' and follow it up with ambiguity" (57). When talking about English-written transgressive fiction, Mookerjee asserts that the British and American traditions often overlap even though he distinguishes certain aspects in which they differ, for example that the American style tends to be more austere thanks to the influence and "punk sensibility" of Burroughs (6). American transgressive fiction also more commonly "provokes the moralist through a seeming obliviousness to his or her point of view" (Mookerjee 6). In other words, the author makes the text even more ambiguous for the reader to decipher. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this was masterfully done in *American Psycho*, where the ambiguity was so total that it jeopardized the very release of the novel. Despite the misunderstanding that surrounded the publication of Ellis's novel, Mookerjee claims that authors of transgressive fiction make it clear that the story is not to be taken literary: "the author does not expect the reader to accept the story as 'real'" and their work "comes across as a stunt, or a literary exercise rather than literary testimony" (57).

When talking about the contemporary use of the term "transgressive fiction", it was popularized in a column of LA Times journalist Michael Silverblatt in 1993 (Hoey 26). In his article, Silverblatt discussed the rise of novels like *American Psycho,* which

portray startling and shocking events in a nonchalant way, or as he puts it: "the prose decides not to register any surprise". He uses the words "deadened quality" to describe the prose. He writes that these words are "furthered by radical, slashing editing processes, often derived from William Burroughs" (Silverblatt). He comments on the fact that transgressive writing often uses pastiche or – in the case of an author we will discuss in the next part of this thesis, Kathy Acker – even whole pieces of other people's writing. This kind of writing helps "to produce a prose that itself bears testament to mutilation" (Silverblatt). Silverblatt credits Sade and Burroughs as being precursors of the '90s era of transgressive fiction.

Overall, Silverblatt shows disdain for transgressive fiction, and sees it as upsetting and immature. He is not alone in this sentiment – transgressive works are often dismissed by critics and academics – according to Hoey, this is because of the impersonal nature of the style of writing. This goes back to the elusive definition of transgression which largely depends on the readers' expectations: "[t]he 'trans' in "Transgressive Fiction" refers not only to the crossing of boundaries, but also to its back-and-forth movement between text and reader. The text's ambiguity and playfulness forces the reader to provide the moral and structural boundaries that the text refuses" (Hoey 28). This is why she sees these works as hard to critique: "As Transgressive Fiction is written in order to create an extreme emotional reaction, looking at it from the arm's length of critical distance is always going to produce an unsatisfying experience" (29). She adds: "Readers and critics who approach these works with traditional referential modes of criticism are unfulfilled by its lack of objective, extractable meaning, its refusal to commit or comment on ideology and its disinterest in clarity and communication" (Hoey 37).

4.1 Blank fiction

Some academic texts use the term "blank fiction" when discussing the works of authors like Ellis and Palahniuk. In one of the first academic papers concerning the subject of blank fiction, James Annesley defines this type of writing as focusing on "the extreme, the marginal, and the violent" in which "[t]he limits of human body seem indistinct, blurred by cosmetics, narcotics, disease and brutality" (1). These texts are also characterized by a "sense of indifference and indolence" (Annesley 1). Writers of

blank fiction share a "common interest in the kinds of subjects that obsessed William Burroughs, Georges Bataille and the Marquis de Sade" which are "sex, death and subversion" (Annesley 2). From these descriptions we can recognize that blank fiction is in most respects viewed and defined in the same way as transgressive fiction. However, blank fiction is mainly concerned with American urban spaces of the late 20th century (Annesley 2). It seems that the temporal and geographical boundaries are the main difference between the two labels. Because blank fiction is arguably a subset of transgressive fiction, we will keep using the term transgressive fiction when referring to this type of writing in this thesis.

4.2 The role of self-harm and self-destruction in transgressive fiction

We have discussed the theme of violence, but we have yet to explore instances when violence is being directed towards oneself. We will do that briefly in this chapter. The theme of self-destruction in Chuck Palahniuk's works will be explored in depth in the next chapters of this thesis.

With the theme of this thesis being *self*-destruction, it is necessary to investigate the importance of individualism in American culture. As we have discussed earlier, it is one of the founding elements of American identity. Booker explains America's obsession with individualistic defiance as "the formative impact of a particularly individualistic brand of Protestantism on American thought" combined with the fact that "most of our national myths arose during a nineteenth century dominated by Romanticism. Thus the central American image of heroism is one of the rebellious individual, a sort of Byron of the Wild West" (9). If an individual is the ultimate hero, we can then argue that a total destruction of the self is one of the biggest transgressions he or she can commit. If a person destroys him or herself, he or she is literally destroying everything that should be historically held sacred in American society.

However, self-harm can sometimes be just an affirmation of one's existence in the world and it doesn't have to be viewed negatively. A wish to destroy him or herself can oftentimes actually be a desire to find oneself by discarding anything that is deemed nonessential. The goal is to reach a pure state where nothing but the true self remains. This is mostly the case for Palahniuk's early novels, whose protagonists feel so oppressed by their circumstances they feel like the only escape is to destroy themselves.

Mookerjee writes that “the transgressive antihero seeks closeness with death as a key to a lost vitality that thrives in the absence of ideation” (2). In Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* and Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting*, which is another famous transgressive text, “characters seek out physical trauma as a way of achieving closeness [to death]” (Mookerjee 195). These attempts to get close to death are however not meant to lead to total annihilation, they represent an escape from the repressive social structures the characters wish to rid themselves of. In this way, self-harm and self-destruction can have a cleansing, spiritual effect. An example of an author who often investigates this kind of purifying form of self-destruction is the American writer Kathy Acker. In his book *Raids on Human Consciousness,* Arthur F. Redding writes that most of Acker’s protagonists are masochists and he actually quite dramatically states that “the theme courses through her prose like a virus” (227). Redding offers an example of Janey Smith, a hero of Ackers’s 1978 novel *Blood and Guts in High School*, who explicitly states: "I hated myself. I did everything I could to hurt myself" (qtd. in Redding 277). However, this self-inflicted violence is meant to have a restoring effect. Redding writes that “this self-destruction is always bound up with a utopian if somewhat solipsistic desire for a radical transformation” (277) because, as Janey writes, "[w]e knew we couldn't change the shit we were living in so we were trying to change ourselves" (qtd. in Redding 277). Put in another way, self-harm and self-destruction are sometimes the only ways an individual can change the oppressive circumstances he or she is confronted with and in that way feel at least a little bit more free.

4.3 Transgressive fiction and its end according to Chuck Palahniuk

In a 2003 documentary about the author titled *Postcards from the Future*, Palahniuk defines transgressive writing (or “transgressional”, how he calls it) as “fiction in which characters misbehave and act badly, sort of commit crimes or pranks as a way of either feeling alive or sort of as political acts of civil disobedience”. He immediately declares the style of writing to be “dead in the water”, at least for the time being, because of the traumatic events of 9/11: “because suddenly any kind of transgressional fiction that was sitting on any desk in New York ready to be published was suddenly pulled off the market”. Publishers simply didn’t want to risk putting out a book that could be seen as provocative because, as Palahniuk explains, “any eco-terrorism,

political terrorism, societal pranking, anything like that suddenly was just gonna look like big blanket terrorism. And publishing knew it was not going to be received with any sense of humor". He credits these changes as what halted the film adaptation of his second novel *Survivor*, which is not totally unexpected given the fact that the protagonist of the story hijacks a plane full of passengers. Surprisingly, he welcomes the perceived departure from transgression in literature: "But in a way it's sort of good [transgressional fiction is] dead in the water because you can only stand on a soap box and rant for so long before you just turn into wallpaper". Palahniuk thinks the tendency for social commentary in literature is to be less conspicuous and more entertaining. He says that fiction "has to be charming and seductive and really entertaining the way it had to be in the 1940s and '50s during the whole Cold war" (*Postcards from the Future*). This era was largely dominated by genres like science fiction, fantasy, and horror, types of writing which are less literal about their social critique.

Palahniuk has a clear answer regarding the question if transgressive fiction instigates the need for rebellious acts in its readers. In a non-fiction short story called "Monkey Think, Monkey Do", Palahniuk discusses his writing and its connection to reality. He writes that some of the mischievous acts of civil disobedience described in *Fight Club* were actually real things he heard of from strangers. In his mind, these little revolts were minor manifestations of young people's overarching need to transgress, or, in the words of Francisco Collado-Rodríguez, they were "a reflection of the violent ethos of a transgressive generation that demanded the writing of transgressive fiction" (17). In this piece, Palahniuk clearly highlights the importance of the reader to actually act upon the indignation he or she feels about the world and not just to read about it in transgressive novels: "[Y]ou can make what Kierkegaard called your Leap of Faith, where you stop living as a reaction to circumstances and start living as a force for what you say should be. What's coming is a million new reasons to go ahead. What's going out is the cathartic transgressive novel" (*Stranger Than Fiction* 215). In his view, transgressive literature should provoke its audience to action.

However, Palahniuk remains more or less constant in his views on transgressive fiction and its ending – the anthology of essays on Palahniuk's work, *Sacred and Immoral*, features an interview in which he once again dismisses transgressive fiction and repeats his comparison of transgressive writers as moralists standing on a soap box:

"Transgressional fiction gets boring. Someone standing on a soap box and beating a drum can only hold any audience for so long" (Kavanagh 182). In an interview he gave to the Czech literary magazine *Host* in 2017, Palahniuk declares that he would choose a different ending for *Fight Club* were he to write it after 9/11. If written now, he would consider such a conclusion a predictable cop-out, not to mention in poor taste ("Ukazuji čtenářům" 11).

His comments about the end of transgressive fiction are interesting. None of the academics studying the phenomenon of transgression in literature whose arguments were used in this chapter claim that transgression in fiction has particularly lessened or is going away. Is Palahniuk referring only to a certain spectrum of novels, possibly those written by his contemporaries? Does he view transgression more in terms of blank fiction – a subtype of transgressive fiction which regards this kind of writing as a mostly isolated phenomenon of the late 20th century America? Or is he referring mostly to changes in his own style of writing? The evolution of his writing style and themes he explores will be discussed in closer detail in the next chapter. Before that happens, there is one question that needs to be raised in a section focused on Palahniuk's opinions about his own writing, and that is: should we take into account a writer's own ideas about his own works, especially if he has such a distinctive public persona as Palahniuk has? Palahniuk grants a lot of interviews and often shares his opinions via his fan website *The Cult* (the name of the website, while probably chosen as a nod to *Fight Club*, nonetheless indicates the way in which Palahniuk is revered by his fans). Palahniuk has strong opinions and gives definitive answers to most question, which is a style of communication not dissimilar to the way he writes his fiction. It makes one wonder if part of what he's saying is just a pose aimed to enforce his public persona. In other words, should we take his assertion that transgressive fiction as we knew it before the year 2001 ceased to exist even though there is evidence to the contrary in his own writing? A closer analysis of his works will uncover the answer to this question.

5 Chuck Palahniuk's career and the evolution of his writing

5.1 The features of Palahniuk's writing

Chuck Palahniuk graduated with a BA in journalism from the University of Oregon, after which he briefly worked in Portland's local newspaper (Collado-Rodríguez 4). Palahniuk's direct and detached style of writing clearly reflects his journalistic background. Collado-Rodríguez also credits fiction-writing classes, which the novelist attended when he was well into his thirties, as a contributing factor of his minimalist writing style. The workshop was led by the writer Tom Spanbauer, who is the inventor of a style called "dangerous writing", a method based on the expression of a writer's fear of embarrassment "filtered through a minimalist approach" (Collado-Rodríguez 3). Palahniuk discusses the minimalist style in his non-fiction book *Stranger Than Fiction: True Stories* (2004), where he describes this approach as "writing without passing judgment. Nothing is fed to the reader as 'fat' or 'happy'. You can only describe actions and appearances in a way that makes a judgment occur in the reader's mind" (144). Collado-Rodríguez suggests that the unadorned style works in an interesting conjunction with the dark and grotesque themes of Palahniuk's prose, where the author just hints at events that are being described and the actual reality is hidden under the surface of the text for the reader to find out (4). The novelist prefers to use short, bare sentences that resemble informal speech; this characteristic is especially prominent in his novel *Survivor*, whose narrative is supposed to be a direct recording of a story the protagonist narrates in the black box of an otherwise empty Boeing 747. Palahniuk's directness also manifests in his habit of including the reader in the story – he frequently uses the word "you" when addressing no one in particular ("the first step to eternal life is you have to die" (*Fight Club* 11)). This is probably done partly to draw the reader further into the narrative and partly to amplify the transgression of personal boundaries, both in the physical and cultural sense, the characters are often subject to (Collado-Rodríguez 5). Repetition is another peculiarity of Palahniuk's prose. He often chooses certain words or phrases that periodically echo throughout the book, for example *Fight Club's* famous mantra "The first rule about fight club is you don't talk about fight club" which reappears several times. Apart from giving the prose a peculiar rhythm, these repetitions also serve as links connecting various parts of the narrative. They are essentially guiding the reader through the story.

Another distinctive feature of Palahniuk's novels is the frequent addition of various instructions and interesting technical facts covering a vast variety of topics. They range from ordinary, day-to-day advice like "store candles in the freezer until ready to use" (*Survivor* 265) and "[t]o shrink swollen eyes, lie down with a slice of raw potato over each" (*Snuff* 123) to peculiar, specialized knowledge like "you can mix … nitroglycerin with sodium nitrate and sawdust to make dynamite" (*Fight Club* 73). Palahniuk explains his use of these vignettes as a way to give his characters a level of competence so readers can see they have certain life experience ("Ukazuji čtenářům" 13). Apart from practical information, Palahniuk's characters don't shy away from indulging in philosophical asides and contemplating all aspects of human existence, probably the most quoted example of which is *Fight Club's* famous line about consumerism – "the things you used to own, now they own you" (44).

Eduardo Mendieta aptly summarizes the various features of Palahniuk's writing and the effects they have on readers:

> On the one hand, there is the orality of the narrative: short sentences, circling back around producing a rhythmic tempo that creates a thread that sustains a fragmented temporal sequencing. On the other hand, there is the fascination with details, with the collecting of vignettes of the rare, strange, and fantastic. Together, Palahniuk's novels make a veritable encyclopedia of minutiae and trivia about all sorts of potentially useful information: how to remove sweat stains, how to eat a lobster, how to make a bomb, how to remove wrinkles from the forehead, what kinds of steroids to use and with what supplements, how to make soap from human fat, where to find this fat, and so on. Under the mundane and pedestrian dwells the fantastic and horrific. (407–408)

5.2 Breakthrough and early novels

Before the release of his first and arguably still his best known novel *Fight Club*, Palahniuk tried to publish his first longer work. He was, however, not successful in this endeavor. This piece, later published as *Invisible Monsters*, was rejected by 12 publishers, this was mostly because of its violent subject matter (Callado-Rodriguez 2). Upon its release, *Fight Club* (1996) received positive reviews. The author and the story

however really became a critical and commercial success after the release of David Fincher's film adaptation in 1999 starring famous actors Brad Pitt, Edward Norton, and Helena Bonham-Carter. The movie and the book soon achieved cult status (Callado-Rodriguez 2). The story of "a god-forsaken young man who discovers that his rage at living in a world filled with failure and lies cannot be pacified by an empty consumer culture" (as defined in the back cover blurb of the novel's 1997 edition) struck a nerve with the disillusioned youth of the 1990s and continues to inspire audiences to this day. Curiously, parts of the fictional story became a reality – fans of the novel were inspired to establish their own fight clubs, and some of the book's more memorable quotes even entered the common vernacular (Collado-Rodríguez 6). In an afterword included with later editions of the novel Palahniuk writes that he has heard people reference the novel without actually knowing they are doing so and sometimes without even knowing that there is a novel of the name in the first place. In a funny twist, mainstream culture started to appropriate *Fight Club's* subversive ideas and aesthetic ("Afterword").

After the success of his novel and the movie, Palahniuk managed to publish two novels in 1999. *Survivor*, a story of the last living member of a religious cult who is recounting his life story and the events that led him to the present moment – piloting an airplane, waiting for the fuel to run out and recording his narrative into the plane's black box. Like *Fight Club*, the novel is written in a non-linear structure. *Survivor* also features reverse pagination (the first page is marked by the number 289) that serves as a countdown leading to the protagonist's eventual death. The third novel – the previously rejected *Invisible Monsters* – came out later that year. Its structure is also non-chronological, and it is arguably the most grotesque and gruesome of the three novels. It tells the story of a former catwalk model that has lost her looks due to a disfiguring accident. The novel serves as a satire of the fashion and beauty industries and as a commentary on the importance of image and appearance in contemporary society. Surprisingly, the story was revamped after more than a decade later and was republished as *Invisible Monsters Remix* (2012). The book's description on the publisher's website states that "[i]njected with new material and special design elements, *Invisible Monsters Remix* fulfills Chuck Palahniuk's original vision for his 1999 novel" ("Invisible Monsters Remix"). The order of the chapters is rearranged and new content is added along with cues that prompt the reader to jump to specific chapters

in a style that is customary for the Choose Your Own Adventure brand of books. It’s not clear if this edition should be counted among the author’s canonical books. A rather negative review in the Kirkus Reviews magazine states that the author “doesn’t so much reorder the book as augment the disjointed, whiplash atmosphere its author intended” and dismisses the text as “a superfluous artifact” aimed more at Palahniuk’s fans and collectors (“Invisible Monsters Remix”). The last of the author’s novels that was released before 9/11 was *Choke* (2001). The main topic the story tackles is addiction; apart from the protagonist being a sex-addict, the novel explores addiction as a broad societal problem that stems from people’s dissatisfaction with the complex influences of modern life (Collado-Rodríguez 12). Choke was adapted for film in 2008, but the movie didn’t reach the same level of acclaim as David Fincher’s version of *Fight Club* (“Choke”).

As is already evident from the brief descriptions of his early prose, Palahniuk’s first four novels share a number of characteristics. Antonio Casado de Rocha points out that Palahniuk’s first novels share a similar literary sensibility; they all feature a “contemporary setting, first-person narratives” and a “sharp post-modernist style”, they can therefore “be read almost like a single text” (105). Collado-Rodríguez proposes that the fragmented narrative of these novels reflects the desire of the narrators (who are also always the books’ protagonists) to make sense out of their complex lives (9). Because, as Palahniuk argues in *Stranger Than Fiction,* “life never works except in retrospect. And writing makes you look back. Because since you can't control life, at least you can control your version (205).

5.3 “The Horror Trilogy”

The next few years saw the publication of what some of Palahniuk‘s fans call his “horror trilogy”. This marks the point when he started to experiment with different genres and narrative devices. In 2002, he published *Lullaby*, a critically acclaimed book with “neo-gothic elements” (Collado-Rodríguez 13). The story centers around a mysterious African chant that immediately kills anyone who hears it. It is not a full departure from his typical style but – apart from his usual themes of social injustice and transgressive acts of social disobedience – the novelist also explores a more abstract theme of the power of words and language and their capacity to change people’s lives.

The novel earned Palahniuk a nomination for the Bram Stoker Award (Collado-Rodríguez 13). Palahniuk's sixth novel *Diary* (2003) is, as the name suggests, a story written in a diary form, it is however not narrated in the first person, as one would expect, but in the second person. It tells the story of Misty Wilmont, an artist who was lured to her husband's childhood home of Wytansea Island to unknowingly play a part in an occult tradition that sustains the existence of locals on the island. Reminiscent of horror classics such as *The Wicker Man* or *It*, the novel also serves as a commentary on both the destructive and restorative abilities of art (Collado-Rodríguez 14). Experimental in its structure, *Haunted* (2005) is framed as a collection of short stories linked together by the main narrative, which recounts the experiences of 19 writers on a literary retreat. *Haunted* features "Guts", a short story that was previously published in the *Playboy* magazine and that is infamous for being so gruesome it makes listeners sick during live readings (Collado-Rodríguez 14).

5.4 Later novels

Haunted was followed by another experiment in storytelling – the narrative of *Rant: An Oral Biography of Buster Casey* (2007) is formed by short descriptions of the main character's life made by his friends, acquaintances, and enemies, which gives the reader a disjointed picture of a person who is hailed as a saint by some and condemned as a murderous villain by others. The author partly goes back to criticizing certain aspects of mainstream society but with the difference that *Rant* is set in a fictitious dystopian society. The author's next novel, *Snuff* (2008), focuses on the world of pornography and is therefore quite sexually explicit in its content. Among other things, the story is notable for its use of multiple narrators, a feature Palahniuk doesn't use often in his works. *Snuff* didn't achieve high critical acclaim, surprisingly not due to its suggestive content but rather for its slow narrative pace (Collado-Rodríguez 15). The next book – *Pygmy* (2009) – was another critical and commercial flop. It is arguably the most experimental of Palahniuk's novels to date – it tells the story of an undercover soldier from an undefined totalitarian regime who travels to the United States masked as an exchange student. The most prominent feature of this novel its language – it is narrated in hardly comprehensible broken English, which discouraged many readers. The less experimental *Tell-All* (2010) tells the story of an aging Hollywood actress, her

caretaker, and a writer who is writing the actress's memoir. Once again, the story explores the power of the written word and its influence on people's lives. The novel also examines the cruel and destructive side of the entertainment industry (Collado-Rodríguez 15).

The next two novels the author released were *Damned* (2011) and *Doomed* (2013), the first two installments of a planned trilogy. They were more successful than some of Palahniuk's previous works even though they still divide the author's readership (Collado-Rodríguez 15). Inspired by Judy Bloom's classic novels for children, both books are narrated by a dead 13-year-old girl who gives a sarcastic account of her life in Hell. Being the daughter of a movie star and a producer, her upbringing is so valueless and bleak that she actually quite enjoys her new home. A rather positive *New York Times* review of *Damned* highlights how the novel "merrily exploits the idea of pop culture as an empty substitute for faith" which reflects some of Palahniuk's usual themes (Maslin). Overall, however, both novels have a lighter tone than most of his previous books. The last two novels Palahniuk published so far were *Beautiful You* (2014) and *Adjustment Day* (2018). Both books received mixed reviews and are often thought to be too derivative of Palahniuk's earlier works ("Adjustment Day").

5.5 Non-fiction, short stories, and graphic novels

The second decade of this century saw Palahniuk experimenting with the form of his writing. In 2015, he wrote *Fight Club 2*, a sequel to his seminal work. Uncharacteristically, *Fight Club 2* is a graphic novel created together with the artist Cameron Stewart. The plot of the story takes place ten years after the events of the first installment, and it shows us where the narrator of *Fight Club* (previously unnamed, now called Sebastian) is now. The graphic novel features meta-textual references to the previous novel and to the author himself. Palahniuk and Stewart are currently in the process of publishing a follow-up graphic novel, *Fight Club 3* (Boucher). Even more unexpected than writing a sequel to *Fight Club* in the form of a graphic novel was arguably Palahniuk's next project – in 2016 and 2017, Palahniuk authored two publications which were part text, part coloring books for adults: the short-story

collection *Bait: Off-Color Stories for You to Color* (2016) and the novella *Legacy: An Off-Color Novella for You to Color* (2017) ("Books By Chuck Palahniuk").

Apart from longer works, Palahniuk often publishes short stories in magazines. In 2014, he edited (together with two colleagues) an anthology of short stories titled *Burnt Tongues.* According to the back cover, it is a collection of transgressive fiction "with taboo subjects, unique voices, shocking images—nothing safe or dry" (*Burnt Tongues*). What's interesting about this anthology is that the stories were written by Palahniuk's fans, concretely they were contributions written by the attendants oh his online writing workshop ("Read Chuck's Introduction…"). The collection *Make Something Up* (2015) contains the author's own 21 short stories.

We shouldn't forget to mention Palahniuk's non-fiction books – or what he claims to be non-fiction because according to Collado-Rodríguez, in these books the author "confuses the traditional borders between invented and factual life" (15). *Fugitives and Refugees: A Walk in Portland, Oregon* (2003) is an unconventional tourist guide of his hometown of Portland in which, beside the expected tips, the reader gets to know the city's more obscure secrets like haunted houses, underground tunnels, and other pieces of urban mythology. In *Stranger than Fiction: True Stories* (2004), the novelist presents stories from his life as well as some of his thoughts on writing and life in general. Although labeled non-fiction, the way in which some of the facts in this book are presented continuously challenges "the reader's traditional ability to differentiate fact from fiction" (Collado-Rodríguez 16).

It is evident that Palahniuk is a prolific writer who doesn't shy away from pushing limits with his art. His prose has gotten more experimental after the publication of his first four novels, and he's open to exploring different forms and genres. His later novels also seem less focused on the criticism of the contrary impulses of modern culture; their plots "pivot on the supernatural, as opposed to the intersections between the psychological, political, and philosophical" (Kavadlo, "With Us or Against Us" 105). As was mentioned before, Palahniuk started to prefer the horror genre because of the the element of entertainment stylized prose offers to readers. In Palahniuk's view, an entertained audience is "more likely to tolerate and recognize a different viewpoint" which means the overall message the author tries to convey doesn't get lost (Kavanagh 181). When discussing the way his writing has evolved over the years in *Host*,

Palahniuk states that now he prefers to explore lighter themes and often chooses to write happy endings ("Ukazuji čtenářům" 11). While that may be true, this assertion seems a bit surprising given that his writing, while maybe a bit playful and more diverse, still seems as provocative, outrageous, and gruesome as ever. The aim of the next section of this thesis will be to analyze the theme of self-destruction in Palahniuk's works and trace its development throughout his career.

6 The theme of self-destruction in Palahniuk's works

As was already mentioned, self-destruction is a prominent feature of Palahniuk's writing. Self-directed assaults are inflicted on all levels – physical, emotional, and spiritual; transforming one's body beyond recognition, rejecting comfort and wealth in exchange for frugality, and dismissing one's own believes are only three examples of the way self-harm and self-abnegation are presented in his books. They are clear manifestations of an individual's contempt for society and although these feelings of defiance often find their release in violence towards the outside world, these instances are rarely as formative as being destructive towards oneself. It would be an oversimplification to think of self-destruction in Palahniuk's works as just misdirected hatred towards outside forces. As Jesse Kavadlo states – "the novels are less acts of fantasized revenge than elaborate rituals of self ruin" ("The Fiction of Self-destruction" 5).

As is true for the rest of Palahniuk's prose (and transgressive fiction in general), we cannot take instances of self-destruction at face value. Characters always have hidden motives for wanting to be annihilated, and if we look closely, we can see that a total destruction is rarely the ultimate goal. Most of Palahniuk's novels, especially the early ones, are in their essence radical attempts at freeing oneself from the outside world, be it the mainstream culture, people's expectations, or the ego. In his essay titled "Surviving American Culture", Eduardo Mendieta states that Palahniuk's novels are about "unmaking, uncoupling, and disentangling our selves from the normal self into which we have been socialized" (395). They are tales of "surviving American Culture" in a cultural climate in which "deviance is the health of the individual in a sick society" (395). Transgression above the limits of what is deemed acceptable and expected is the key. It is simply the thought of letting go that is important in Palahniuk's treatment of self-destruction – despite their reckless actions, the author's protagonists ultimately don't succeed in their efforts to die, or at least not completely.

However, the purpose of self-destruction isn't only to get back at contemporary society, self-harm also guides a person in the search for the true version of his or her inner self. When discussing *Fight Club* and *Survivor*, Kavadlo notes that each of the protagonists "struggles to create some kind of meaning, yet the only way he can (…) is through particularly physical and peculiarly masculine forms of self-destruction" ("With

Us or Against Us" 105). These characters must, however, keep on living and finally take responsibility for their choices after years of feeling like they have no control over their destiny – "[t]he possibility of suicide is there to relieve anxiety and to act as a catalyst for a more authentic life" (de Rocha 112). After a violent intervention, only the essential things stay behind. In a way, self-destruction is about finding truth in a world full of endless stimulation and contrary impulses: "[i]n Palahniuk's writing, the human body is the site for the inscription of a search for modes of authentic living in a world where the difference between the fake and the genuine has ceased to function" (Slade 62). Taking control over one's destiny is the driving force behind the creation of the underground fight clubs in *Fight Club*: "Tyler explained it all, about not wanting to die without any scars, about being tired of watching only professionals fight, and wanting to know more about himself. About self-destruction" (52). What's left is the feeling of being truly alive and genuinely present. This attitude in a way copies the mental outlook the Founding Fathers promoted – an individual has the power to take back control over his or her life no matter the circumstances he or she has to face. The difference is that the perspective of Franklin and his contemporaries was predominantly optimistic, whereas Palahniuk continues the subversive tradition of transgressive fiction, as is evident from another one of *Fight Club's* quotable assertions: "It's only after you've lost everything… that you're free to do anything" (70).

There is one important thing we need to mention – despite the distrust of society Palahniuk harbors, he is not a hopeless nihilist. At the end of the day, his characters are capable of showing humanity. The protagonists of both *Fight Club* and *Rant* find themselves being in love by the end of the book, and Tender Branson of *Survivor* lets his fellow passengers to safely parachute out of the plane he is planning to destroy. Mendieta asserts that "notwithstanding Palahniuk's anarchism, and cynicism, he is no misanthrope. Despite the morally desolate landscapes that he paints for us, Palahniuk's characters are still endearing and are sketched with tenderness and sympathy" (407). In a way, Palahniuk's books are about finding a meaningful human connection, a thing which tends to be missing from the lives of the characters either because of their personal circumstances or because of the way modern society isolates individuals and prevents them from connecting on a genuine level. Kavadlo proclaims that Palahniuk's works aren't as nihilistic as everyone thinks – readers and critics alike frequently focus

only on the obvious aspects of the plot, like the glaring violence and sexual transgressions, and condemn them as nihilistic or too macho. He points out that “for all their shock and controversy” the novels have “fewer deaths than the average airport-bookstore thriller” (“The Fiction of Self-Destruction” 21). He thinks readers oftentimes miss the positive parts of the narrative like “beauty, hope, and romance” that are dispersed and sometimes cleverly hidden throughout Palahniuk’s “seemingly ugly, existential, and nihilistic works” (“The Fiction of Self-Destruction” 3-4). The novelist himself discusses the misunderstanding of his works in the introduction to *Stranger Than Fiction*; he claims that most of his novels are just stories of “a lonely person looking for some way to connect with other people”, a fact that many readers completely overlook (xv).

In his essay, Kavadlo also brings up an interesting point that connects self-destruction of the characters to the style and narrative structure of Palahniuk’s novels which are, as we have already discussed, oftentimes written in a disjointed and seemingly chaotic fashion: “Palahniuk has pioneered a new genre, the fiction of self-destruction: his subject and subtext for all novels is, of course, self-destruction—fight clubs, explosions, and deliberate plane crashes suggest little else—but the novels themselves philosophically and narratively self-destruct as well, in their recurring irony and twist endings” (“The Fiction of Self-Destruction” 20). It is true that Palahniuk’s novels can sometimes seem overly complicated and hard to follow, it is refreshing to think of these writing choices as an extension of the topics the books aim to explore.

6.1 Early novels

Palahniuk’s first four books (*Fight Club*, *Survivor*, *Invisible Monsters*, *Choke*) will be labeled as his early novels. As we have established, these texts bear many similarities, such as the topics they explore, their disjointed structure, shocking endings, and the style they are written in. Despite not sharing the same setting or characters, the stories seem to inhabit the same literary universe. Another thing these texts have in common is that all of them came out before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, an event which changed many things in the social and cultural space of the Western society. As was discussed before, Palahniuk claims the event also changed the development of transgressive writing. Incidentally, Palahniuk’s older novels seem to

foretell 9/11, what with *Fight Club's* portrayal of a terrorist group and *Survivor* culminating with the protagonist's hijacking of a plane. Of course that the author doesn't possess the ability to foretell the future, he was just astute enough to capture the zeitgeist of the end of the millennium. The reasons for people's discontent were varied as we have established in previous chapters. In his essay "With Us or Against Us: Chuck Palahniuk's 9/11," Jesse Kavadlo neatly summarizes the major problems with the culture of the time: "*Fight Club* and *Survivor* are works of fiction that capture the frustrations inherent in stultifying corporate and materialistic homogeneity associated with 1980s Wall Street culture through the 1990s commerce-driven dot-com bubble" (104). Along with other artists of the era, Palahniuk was just reacting to the events and injustices of the time ("With Us or Against Us" 104).

In Palahniuk's early novels, destruction and self-destruction are firmly linked to materialism, capitalism, and ownership of things and living beings. And although most of Palahniuk's work serve as a social commentary on American culture, the tendency is more prominent in his first four novels. Though the topics they investigate overlap, each of them focuses on a specific aspect of society – to oversimplify, *Fight Club* is mainly a criticism of consumerism and the uncertain position of males in contemporary society, *Survivor* aims its attention at religion and personal beliefs, *Choke* tackles addiction, and *Invisible Monsters* questions the importance the culture attaches to beauty and personal identity. This thesis will closely analyze only three of these four novels – while *Choke's* treatment of self-destruction is very relevant, its analysis would be redundant since the aspects of Palahniuk's writing it illustrates are similar to the topics of the previous novels.

It needs to be noted that the protagonists of Palahniuk's older novels shouldn't be regarded as heroes whose version of improving their lives is worthy of imitation. They show us to what lengths a tormented person can go to rid him or herself of oppression, as is in keeping with the tradition of transgressive fiction. Palahniuk's heroes function more as "cautionary tales than moral exemplars" ("With Us or Against Us" 105). The author doesn't condone the behavior of these characters, and their actions don't represent his politics. After all, as Kavadlo shrewdly observes: "Palahniuk may be angry at the same violent social conditions … but [his] solution is not more violence: it is to write books" ("The Fiction of Self-destruction" 12). While his aim might be to stir

readers into action, he doesn't necessarily propose they take his flawed heroes as the ultimate example.

6.1.1 *Fight Club* (1996)

The story of *Fight Club* is narrated by an unnamed protagonist who starts to frequent a variety of cancer support groups as a distraction from his insomnia. Palahniuk later gave him a name, Sebastian, in the sequel he wrote in 2015. I will however keep calling him "the narrator" as not to mix the two texts together. His troubles with sleeping are thought to be caused by his stressful job in a car company and the jet lag he suffers from because of his extensive work trips. The support groups give him the release he is looking for until he notices a woman called Marla Singer who also visits these meetings and clearly is just pretending to battle a deadly sickness, just like he is. The narrator sees Marla as a mirror of his own lies, the meetings stop being therapeutic for him, and insomnia starts to trouble him once again. Shortly after that, he meets Tyler Durden, a charismatic and mysterious man who is not afraid to display his extremist views, which are mostly directed at the hypocrisy and consumerism of American society. After the narrator's apartment accidentally explodes, he moves in with Tyler to his crumbling old house. The cohabitation however comes at a price – surprisingly, Tyler asks the narrator to hit him "as hard as [he] can" (46) in return for his generosity. The two men realize fist-fighting energizes them and seems to solve their feelings of inadequacy. Soon, other men start to join their fights, which leads them to establish a series of underground fight clubs. The narrator finds fulfillment with his new life and he stops attending the support group meetings and later even quits his job. Wondering why he's not going to meetings anymore, Marla contacts the narrator who quickly dismisses her. However, because of her phone call, she gets to meet Tyler and the two of them begin a troubled love affair. The narrator starts noticing that Marla and Tyler are never at the same place together which makes him wonder if they are in fact one person. With fight clubs spreading across the country, Tyler starts using these gatherings to impart his anti-establishment, anti-consumerist views to the members of the group. He starts to recruit these men to take part in his pranks on mainstream society. Soon he creates "Project Mayhem", a paramilitary cult-like group composed of his most faithful supporters (who Tyler calls "space monkeys") whose goal is to bring

down the establishment. Their increasingly more violent and destructive attacks start to trouble the narrator and he sets out to stop Tyler and his followers. However, in a shocking twist we learn that Tyler is not a real person, he's just a figment of the narrator's imagination. The narrator is actually the sole originator of the first fight club and the leader of Project Mayhem. Insomnia weakened the narrator's consciousness so much that his perception of reality is seriously compromised. We learn Tyler was operating by himself when the narrator was resting and that it was actually the narrator who blew up his own apartment. Tyler plans the biggest of Project Mayhem's attacks to date – he wants to blow up a skyscraper – and the narrator decides to stop him. Their altercation ends up with Tyler holding the narrator at gunpoint on top of the building, planning that both of them would die as martyrs during the explosion. Luckily, Marla arrives and this prompts Tyler to disappear. The narrator is expecting to die in the ensuing explosion but the bomb never detonates due to the incorrect way in which it was constructed. After realizing this, the narrator decides to shoot himself. The last chapter finds the narrator in a mental hospital (although at first he thinks he's in Heaven talking to God). In the last scene of the book, several employees of the mental institution approach the narrator to let him know they're members of Project Mayhem and that the organization still operates.

With quotes like "Maybe self-improvement isn't the answer … Maybe self destruction is the answer" (49) one doesn't need to look hard to find instances of self-destruction in *Fight Club*. Indeed, the whole premise of a fight club centers around self-destruction. Granted, the men that frequent it fight in pairs so there is always a winner, but winning in a fight is rarely lauded, it is usually quite the opposite. When a young attractive man, later called "mister angel face" (123), comes to the fight club, the narrator challenges him to a fight and purposefully damages his face because he was "in a mood to destroy something beautiful" (122) due to his insomnia creeping up on him again. The narrator isn't portrayed as a winner nor as a barbarian for being so brutal, the main reason for his fighting seems to be the cathartic release of pent up rage. The young man is not being made fun of for losing and later he actually comes back and becomes a member of Project Mayhem. We get a feeling that most of the men don't fight to win but rather to surpass their own limitations and to let out frustration. These characters also feel lost in a society that sees them as mere consumers and not real

individuals – Robert Bennett argues that the two protagonists turn to violence "because they find it humanizing rather than dehumanizing" (69). According to Mendieta, the fights represent the characters' desperate need to connect with their masculinity. He argues that historically, masculinity used to be clearly defined in American culture, and what it constituted to be a man mostly had to do with having served in the army and being part of something greater. And even those who were ideologically opposed to the "government's decision to rain terror upon a poor people" (Mendieta 396) could still explain it away as a misguided effort to extend the noble ideas America stood for. But that has changed in the later decades of the 20th century. We have discussed this shift in people's perception of the United States and the ideology of its government in the two first chapters of this thesis. Another thing that aided in the crisis of masculinity Mendieta writes about was the disintegration of the basic family unit where boys were often abandoned by their fathers and therefore lacked a masculine role model in their lives – in the past "being a man meant having gone through certain rites of passage which were overseen and officiated by other men" (369). But that time was long gone. According to Mendieta, the characters of *Fight Club* were trying to become men in a culture "that only projects violent male role models, or commercialized and glossy versions of males" and where cultural heroes like Rambo or James Bond "project an ideal that power does not entail responsibilities, and violence is more gallant than deliberation or understanding". *Fight Club's* characters are socialized into thinking that what constitutes a man is violence, it's then only logical that that's where they try to find the connection to their masculinity. But what they end up finding is not the expected feeling of vindication when a fight is won, they find immediacy and a sense of release because in their world, physical violence is "a substitute for immediacy and experience" while also being "a reaction to frustrated expectation" (Mendieta 396).

Another instance of self-destruction pertains more to spiritual abnegation than to physical assaults – the narrator quits his high-paying job and leaves behind all the possessions that he carefully collected over the years in order to live in a rundown building. He realizes that for years he had been trying to buy fulfillment instead of simply living his life. After years of his consumerist lifestyle, he starts to see that this approach is not satisfying:

> You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple years you're satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you've got your sofa issue handled. Then the right set of dishes. Then the perfect bed. The drapes. The rug. Then you're trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you. (44)

The narrator has been so brainwashed by the materialism his generation grew up to admire that he is quite surprised when he feels more content when living frugally. He realizes it is better to be poor and satisfied with what he has than endlessly chasing an unreachable dream. Jeffrey Sartain comments on the change the narrator goes through in terms of consumerism and he states that at the beginning, he "views things falling apart as a bad thing, and works hard to fight off chaos and entropy" (42). The main way in which the narrator battled chaos in his life was through materialism and chasing perfection through taking care of his possessions: "It used to be enough that when I came home angry and knowing that my life wasn't toeing my five-year plan, I could clean my condominium or detail my car. Someday I'd be dead without a scar and there would be a really nice condo and car" (*Fight Club* 49). However, throughout the story, he starts to embrace the unavoidable death and ruin life eventually leads to. Sartain sees chaos and entropy to be one of the main themes of Palahniuk's fiction, the author however shows it in a way that vastly differs from the attitudes of contemporary culture: "Instead of viewing chaos and entropy as something bad that should be avoided at all costs, they are the fundamental forces at work in the world, and Palahniuk advises that one should get used to them, or insanity might follow because of the futile fight against the underlying chaotic forces of nature" (Sartain 43). Destruction and ruin are shown as inevitable parts of life and the narrator's decision to embrace them rather than to run away from them seems to free him in a way. He is no longer afraid of what might happen if his things, his life, and even his body start to disintegrate: "Nothing is static. Even the *Mona Lisa* is falling apart. Since fight club, I can wiggle half the teeth in my jaw" (49).

Tyler summarizes all the feelings of dissatisfaction he and his peers feel in his memorable speech:

> You have a class of young strong men and women, and they want to give their lives to something. Advertising has these people chasing cars and clothes they don't need. Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don't really need. We don't have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do, we have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against the culture. The great depression is our lives. We have a spiritual depression. (149)

Interestingly, this assertion could be a great call to arms to effect a positive change. By itself, some of Tyler's ideas are not dissimilar to those of the Transcendentalists, who eschewed consumerism and appealed to people's right to question authorities. The protagonist's ideas however extremely transgress the expected ways of civil disobedience Thoreau and Emerson would approve of.

Once we realize Tyler and the narrator are the same person, the theme of self-destruction gets magnified because what we previously saw as an altercation between two individuals – for example when the narrator first hits Tyler – we now understand as self-inflicted assaults. This turns their "acts of sadomasochism into masochism alone" (Kavadlo, "The Fiction of Self-destruction" 5). Kavadlo comes with a thought-provoking take on this shift in the story – throughout the course of the book, we get the idea that the thing the protagonists are fighting against is the perceived "emasculating conformity of contemporary America" but what the unnamed narrator has been really battling is himself, literally and figuratively ("The Fiction of Self-destruction" 5). Kavadlo argues that *Fight Club's* theme of self-destruction is not just a manifestation of anger towards an unjust society, he posits that the characters' rebellion against authorities has its base in the dissatisfaction these people feel towards themselves: "in *Fight Club*, rebellion against the social order is transposed cruelty against the self, not the reverse" (Kavadlo, "The Fiction of Self-destruction" 5). This is an interesting opinion, but we could argue this dissatisfaction with the self is at least partly caused by the culture these individuals find themselves in. It would be in keeping with the fact that a vast number of artworks of the late 20th century uncovered similar feelings of existential anxiety.

Even before Tyler comes onto the scene, the narrator seems to be drawn to death and destruction – his job is to calculate if a recall of a vehicle is necessary when a car shows a malfunction (a malfunction that frequently leads to people dying). He is however unhappy with his job, and sometimes he actually daydreams about suicide ("Every takeoff and landing, when the plane banked too much to one side, I prayed for a crash. That moment cures my insomnia" (25)). Proximity to death ends up being the thing that finally alleviates his sleep problems; he finds contentment when he starts frequenting the cancer support groups. According to Bennett, the narrator "seems to enjoy deliberately confronting sickness and death in all of its most hideous permutations" (68). The narrator claims that "real pain" (19) and listening to people whose lives "come down to nothing, and not even nothing, oblivion" (17) makes him feel "more alive" (22) (Bennett 68-69). The narrator's obsession with death and ruin comes down to confronting his fears and being able to escape them: his "recurring references to sickness and death are best understood as an exploration of how existentialist dread can help foster a more authentic sense of human freedom" (Bennett 71). After all, "[l]osing all hope was freedom (*Fight Club* 12).

When reading *Fight Club*, we shouldn't forget the fact that the narrator is highly unreliable, he's an individual with deep mental problems. What's more, his split personality can make us doubt that he truly believes the things he, or Tyler, proclaims. As Tyler, he spews anarchist rhetoric, as his true self, he tries to stop the ensuing chaos. We also shouldn't forget the fact that Project Mayhem's members, while trying to fight the constrictive and limited demands of modern life, start to employ the same strategies they are criticizing. Tyler's soldiers are forced to become a herd of blind followers whose only purpose is to carry out orders and to sacrifice their lives. Their nickname, space monkeys, is appropriate since they are mere test subjects sent to space. Mendieta sums up the irony of Project Mayhem's whole endeavor in saying that "a quest for viable masculinity ends up re-enacting the very rituals that have eviscerated masculinity in the first place: misogyny, militarism, bullying, terrorism, and gratuitous violence" (397). Even though Tyler proclaims that "Project Mayhem will break up civilization so we can make something better out of the world" (125) he never hints on any plans for what will happen next, "he offers no viable or sustainable call for political creation,

only metaphysical destruction—which, when enacted, becomes self-destruction" (Kavadlo, "The Fiction of Self-destruction" 12).

It seems that some of *Fight Club's* fans fail to notice the dichotomy of what the characters are saying and what the story is actually showing. Just as the space monkeys, *Fight Club's* readers are "equally guilty of reducing the text to a simplistic example of social satire", failing to understand the shortcomings of such extreme behavior the story purposefully uncovers (Bennett 67). On the other side, some of the critics are also quick to judge the novel based on the more shocking features of the narrative, or they concentrate only on individual topics, such as gender or class, and fail to contemplate the text in its complexity (Bennett 67). Some of the readers simply ignore the nuances of the narrative and focus on its transgressive features: "Palahniuk's psychologically unstable narrator, is no more an anticapitalist hero (as *Fight Club's* fans would have it), than he is some kind of covert capitalist, misogynistic villain (as *Fight Club's* critics claim)" (75). According to Mookerjee, the novel's ambiguity as to whether the depicted events are portrayed reliably and if the author condones such behavior or not "frustrates the critic's compulsion to fit the book into a category" as is usual for other transgressive works (218).

Even though *Fight Club* represents a layered critique of contemporary society, materialism is presented as one of the bigger problems the Western culture of the late 20th century had to face. The novel shows that extreme capitalism and materialism lead to objectification of people because the governing institutions see them as mere cogs in the machine. Self-destruction in all its extremity is described as one of the ways to rid oneself of these societal pressures. The novel however also demonstrates how destructive this behavior can be.

6.1.2 *Survivor* (1999)

At first glance, *Survivor* strikes the reader to be an unusual book – the first page is marked by the number 289 and the chapter title reads 47. Throughout the novel, the page numbers decrease one by one as they count down the inevitable death of the protagonist. His name is Tender Branson, he's in his thirties, and he's had a very unconventional life. He was brought up in a strict religious cult, the Creedish Church, and as a second-born son, he was trained to be a "labor missionar[y]" (*Survivor* 241),

which meant he had to move to the outside world for work to gain money for the Church. The reason for this service is also spiritual, the Church believes that the piousness and work of their members redeem the sins of the rest of the world (229, 230). Tender is “not really a name” as it’s “more of a rank” (242) since all the boys born second into a Creedish family are called that – simply put, “Tenders are workers who tend” (240). Tender Branson was unfortunate to be born three minutes after his twin brother, which made his sibling an “Adam”, a boy that would stay in the community and continue his family line.

After a couple of years of service outside the Church, where Tender is made to do all sorts of menial jobs along with teaching his rich, yet uneducated employers the right etiquette of dining, the cult members back home commit a mass suicide – the Deliverance – which in their eyes marks the beginning of the Apocalypse. Soon after that, the remaining members of the Church working for the unbelievers start killing themselves, as is expected of them. But Tender, unsatisfied and disillusioned after his years of duties, renounced his believes and became very bitter. Apart from his work, he also sets up a fake suicide hot line, where he maliciously convinces callers to end their lives. He meets the sister of one of his victims and falls in love with her. The girl, Fertility Hollis, claims that she can predict future accidents and mass catastrophes and she likes to go look when they happen. It’s around that time that Tender starts suspecting the deaths of the remaining Creedish members are not suicides, but murders. He suspects a mysterious man he meets on the bus to be the killer. It takes him a couple of minutes to recognize the man as his older brother Adam, Tender however doesn’t acknowledge him. Adam accidentally kills Tender’s case worker from the Federal Survivor Retention Program, an agency that oversees the well-being of the cult’s survivors. Tender becomes the primary suspects for this murder.

Soon enough, Tender is the only surviving Creedish Church member in the world. This causes a media frenzy, Tender promptly gets an agent and becomes a celebrity. What follows is a series of plastic surgeries and other procedures, scripted interviews, ghostwritten books, and phony TV shows. As a show of Tender’s morality, a landfill for all the country’s pornographic material is set up in the former Creedish Church compound. All this time, Tender is plotting his suicide, aiming to commit it live in front of as many viewers as possible. As his fame wanes, Tender’s agent urges him to

do something memorable to gain his fans back. Tender asks Fertility to reveal to him when the next big accident is going to happen, he then foretells the event on live television and his star rises again. However, the police are still suspicious of his involvement in his caseworker's murder and plan to seize him. They almost manage to do so during Tender's televised wedding his agent set up to happen during the Super Bowl. Tender however creates a diversion when he predicts the game's outcome and manages to escape with Fertility and Adam who surprisingly teamed up to help Tender out. The three of them set out on their way to Canada, Fertility however leaves them during the escape. Adam and Tender come across the Church's former compound which prompts Adam to recount the real story of the cult – he reveals that living in the Creedish Church was not nearly as idyllic and peaceful as his brother remembers. Shaken, Tender loses control over the car. The ensuing crash injures Adam who urges Tender to bludgeon him with a stone in order for him to escape a prison sentence for the murders he's committed. Tender reconnects with Fertility and together they board a plane that Fertility knows is supposed to be hijacked. When waiting for the abductor, Tender realizes the hijacker is supposed to be him. He lets the passengers parachute out of the plane and starts telling the true story of his life to the black box. The scene of Tender sitting in the cockpit and talking to the recording device actually started the whole novel. Now, Tender is done recounting his life and awaits his death – this is inevitable because the plane will soon run out of fuel. However, we are not sure if Tender survives or not because the story ends in mid-sentence. His survival seems unlikely but in interviews, Palahniuk insists that Tender manages to survive.

As is evident from the plot summary, *Survivor* bears a lot of similarities with Palahniuk's debut. For one, they are similar in terms of narrative – both novels start in medias res, employ a disjointed, non-linear narrative structure, and feature Palahniuk's typical minimalist writing style. They also explore similar themes – destruction is ever-present in both stories along with detailed descriptions of the objectification of human experience – *Survivor* features a lot of instances where life is described in very materialistic terms, for instance, when Tender is describing his work duties, he says that "everything in your life turns into an item on a list. Something to accomplish. You get to see how your life looks flattened out" (269). When Tender becomes famous, he is turned into a commodity by his agent. He ostensibly hates it but he starts to miss his

fancy lifestyle after he loses the spotlight, Fertility calls his intense feelings “Attention Withdrawal Syndrome” (56). When on the run, he is unable to maintain his beauty procedures and slowly starts to lose the looks he got accustomed to. At first, he is terrified by seeing his face without a fake tan. But getting rid of his fabricated image is instrumental in freeing Tender of all influences he had been subjected to. Fertility’s proclamation – “Think of this as *My Fair Lady* or *Pygmalion*, only backward” (53) – evokes Mendieta’s observation about Palahniuk’s novels being Bildungsromans “told in reverse” (395) that we have mentioned in one of the previous chapters.

To truly become his pure self, not only must Tender completely destroy his media image (he undoubtedly eviscerates it when he gives away the results of Super Bowl and subsequently hijacks a commercial plane), he also has to reject his religious beliefs. Even though he already partly did that in the past, the religious doctrine still holds its influence over him. Adam recognizes this and urges his brother to fight it. What he sees as the best way to do that is for Tender to have sex. That would be a big offense in Tender’s eyes because the act of procreation is something that the Creedish Church conditions all their labor missionaries to despise. When Adam reveals to his brother that the Church’s commune wasn’t at all as peaceful as he remembered it – the wholesomeness was a sham, the Church wasn’t really self-sufficient and off the grid as they proclaimed, and their main form of generating income was selling children, or bringing up “slaves” (40) in Adam’s words – Tender doesn’t believe him at first and still feels bad about not killing himself when he was supposed to. Adam assures him: “The only way you’ll ever find your own identity is to do the one thing the Creedish elders trained you most not to do … Commit the one biggest transgression. The ultimate sin. Turn your back on the church doctrine” (40). Tender ends up spending a night with Fertility, the experience is, however, rather underwhelming. Despite that, their encounter leaves the previously sterile (and ironically named) Fertility pregnant.

Despite this transgression, Tender probably ends up finishing the ritual of Deliverance when he decides to steal the plane and kill himself as the last living member of the cult. His eventual perishing is left to the imagination of readers but the logical denouement of the scene is Tender dying given that he’s alone in a plane whose engines are slowly giving out. But one of the posts on *The Cult’s* website claims that Palahniuk refutes this ending and explains that thanks to a really convoluted sequence

of events, Tender manages to escape the plane ("Chuck Explains The Ending of Survivor"). But perhaps the truth about Tender's destiny is not as important. In a way, he actually survives – he keeps on living thanks to the story he narrated to the black box. He himself says as much:
"And my story will survive. … Hear me. See me. Remember me" (1).

Even though he doesn't kill himself during the mass suicide like he's supposed to, Tender seems to be extremely obsessed by death and self-destruction. The most glaring example of this is his suicide prevention hot line where instead of talking the callers down, he urges them to kill themselves and he even stays on the line while they're doing it. He fantasizes about encountering zombies ("I want to be chased by flesh-eating zombies" (255)) and voices nihilistic remarks like "The first time you meet that someone special, you can count on them one day being dead and in the ground" (277) and "Since change is constant, you wonder if people crave death because it's the only way they can get anything really finished" (150). When his agent asks him where he sees himself in five years, he answers with the fatalistic "I see myself dead and rotting" (132). Tender is definitely suicidal and expects to kill himself one day but for some reason he decides to wait. When he realizes he's the last surviving member of the Creedish Church, he starts seeing the world as one big opportunity to commit suicide: "Here in the bathroom with me are razor blades. Here is iodine to drink. Here are sleeping pills to swallow. You have a choice. Live or die. Every breath is a choice. Every minute is a choice" (161). But Tender decides to keep on living, at least for a little while. Even though that over the last few years he lost everything that ever meant anything to him – his family, his believes, and now all his fellow church members along with his agent – he feels strangely liberated from all the things that ever defined him. Although he will exchange his religion for chasing fame and admiration and later will come to despise those influence too, he decides to continue living, at least for the time being:

> Survivor Retention Client Number Eighty-four has lost everyone he ever loved and everything that gave his life meaning. He is tired and sleeps most of the time. He has started drinking and smoking. He has no appetite. He seldom bathes and hasn't shaved in weeks.

> Ten years ago, he was the hardworking salt of the earth. All he wanted was to go to Heaven. Sitting here today, everything that he worked for in the world is lost. All his external rules and controls are gone.
> There is no Hell. There is no Heaven.
> Still, just dawning on him is the idea that now anything is possible.
> Now he wants everything. …
> Really, my life no longer has a point. I'm free. …
> How this feels is just like ten years ago, when I rode with the police downtown. And once again, I am weak. And minute by minute I'm moving away from salvation and into the future.
> Kill myself?
> Thanks, I say. No, thanks.
> Let's not rush anything here. (167-166)

Other characters of the novel also show interest in (self-)destruction. Fertility actually dreams about disasters that are to happen in the future. Just as Tender enjoys listening to the deaths of his suicide line callers, she likes to visit the predicted accidents as they occur and witness the destruction firsthand. It is safe for her to go there because she has enough information to escape the disasters at the end. Both Tender and Fertility treat proximity to death and violence as invigorating and life-affirming, as was the case with the characters of *Fight Club*. Fertility also shows signs of real suicidal tendencies though, she tells Tender as much on the phone. She however never acts upon these urges. Her getting pregnant at the end of the story can be taken as a sign of her choosing life over death. Apart from Fertility's obsession with destruction, the whole country seems to be fascinated by the Creedish survivors and the imminence of death that looms over them. A whole sector of the government is focused on overseeing them. Tender's agent is particularly interested in the cult; she is so obsessed with his life that she volunteers to do the cleaning he is hired to do. An interesting detail connected to the Federal Survivor Retention Program is that when a client (a former Creedish Curch member) commits suicide, case workers mark their file with the word RELEASED instead of DECEASED (247). It's as if these people reached their inevitable goal when they died, as if death was a relief for them.

When Tender eventually becomes the cult's lone survivor, the reaction of the public is immense. His experiences show the ridiculousness of the entertainment industry and pop culture. Because he was brought up outside of the mainstream society, he is the perfect mirror to reflect the absurdity of it all. He is made into an object whose only purpose is to be shown around and make money for his agency. Before anyone can admire him as the last Creedish survival though, his physical appearance has to be completely transformed. Tender's experience of show business makes him even more jaded than before. However, his cynicism was apparent even before he became a star. It seems that he was idealistic when living in his commune and even during his first posting in the outside world, he seemed to be greatly influenced by his Church's utopian view of life. After living outside his commune for a while, he got more cynical; it seems as if the materialist culture of mainstream society made him bitter. He gets very cynical when describing his duties, his employers, and all the food and possessions he comes into contact with in their house. The language used when describing the ownership of things and animals is always tinged with the vocabulary of excessive consumption and destruction. For example, when describing his boss' dinner, Tender says that "everybody at the table will get to mutilate a big dead lobster" (264). When talking about his job, Tender likes to show the destructive nature of human ownership: "After seventeen years of working in private houses every day, the things I know the most about are slapped faces, creamed corn, black eyes, wrenched shoulders, beaten eggs, kicked shins, scratched corneas, chopped onions, bites of all sorts …" (264). His vivid description equates owning and consuming things with violence and self-destruction.

Self-destruction in *Survivor* is presented as something that has the potential to set a person free from the oppressive systems he or she has to face, be it religious beliefs, relentless demands of one's job and the materialist culture that goes with it, and even mainstream pop culture. *Fight Club* put forth a similar message, however it seems that with its open ending, *Survivor* accentuates the possibility of choice a person has to oppose the expectations of external influences. Although we don't know what happens to Tender, we can at least sense that he has gained control over his life and can decide his own destiny, which is much more than we can say about the characters of Palahniuk's previous novel.

6.1.3 *Invisible monsters* (1999)

The story of *Invisible Monsters*, a previously rejected novel, is told in a very disjointed, non-chronological way. Everything is described through the narrator's memories. Like in *Fight Club*, this narrator is unnamed. We know she is a woman and that she survived a physical trauma that left her disfigured, unable to speak, and halted her successful modeling career. Although we don't get to know her real name at first, we know her various aliases, such as Shannon McFarland, Daisy St. Patience, or Bubba-Joan. It's her companion, Brandy Alexander, who gives her most of these names. The story begins at the wedding of a woman named Evie Cottrell, who used to be the narrator's best friend. We later learn that Evie is actually a transgender woman who transitioned early in her life. After recounting this first scene, the narrator starts describing how she met Brandy. The two of them meet in a hospital while undergoing speech therapy. We learn that Brandy is also a transgender woman and also goes by many nicknames. Right after her accident, the narrator is still hoping to continue her modeling career as a hand and foot model but that sadly doesn't happen. Feeling unsure and discouraged, the narrator is comforted by Brandy who helps her to create a new persona. She also urges the disfigured woman to wear a veil.

We then learn about the narrator's humble beginnings. A daughter of simple farmers, she feels ignored by her parents who are more interested in her gay brother Shane whose lifestyle they don't approve of. She starts modeling to gain attention; sadly her parents don't really care about her even after they kick her brother out of the house. The family later hears that Shane died of AIDS, which prompts the remorseful parents to become staunch gay rights supporters. The story then moves to the narrator's time in modeling school where she becomes friends with Evie who, despite their friendship, has an affair with the narrator's boyfriend, a policeman called Manus. Right after her accident, the narrator moves in with Evie. That's when she learns about Manus' affair. It's after Manus breaks into Evie's house with a knife that a shot is fired, mutilating the narrator; at first, it is unclear who did it, but as we later learn in a shocking revelation, it was actually the narrator who pulled the trigger. To protect herself, the narrator locks Manus in a trunk of a car, and before driving away, she sets Evie's house on fire. She flees to Brandy's house where she acquaints a trio of drag queens who have helped Brandy through her multiple plastic surgeries.

At this point comes the biggest twist of the novel – Brandy is actually the narrator's brother, Shane, who had undergone a series of surgeries to look like his beautiful sister. Brandy doesn't realize that the disfigured narrator is the long-lost sibling and the narrator doesn't reveal her true identity because she still feels resentful towards her brother. The two of them set out to find Brandy's sister. During their travel, Brandy confesses that she was once sexually assaulted by a policeman called Manus. The narrator uses the opportunity to get back at her brother – Evie is angry with her and the narrator figures that because her brother/Brandy looks so much like her old self, Evie would get the two of them mixed up. As expected, after Brandy arrives to Evie's wedding, the bride shoots the unwelcome guest. The narrator feels bad about having arranged the shooting, she realizes she actually loves her brother, and she decides to disappear forever, leaving Brandy with her personal documents so she can assume her sister's identity.

There are of course many parallels between *Invisible Monsters* and Palahniuk's previous works. Just as *Survivor*, this novel tackles issues of identity and physical transformation. It, however, does so in more grotesque ways and its major plot twists and and bizarre storylines delve deeper into these topics. Collado-Rodríguez states that *Invisible Monsters* examines important points such as "the fragmentation and fluctuation of the self, the importance of the gaze in the social construction of reality, the role of mass media in the formation of identity or, ultimately, the physical and psychic limits (non) existing between gender and sex" (8). Personal identity is portrayed as something fluid and unstable; things commonly taken as absolute like a person's gender are nonchalantly adjusted – for example, several of the characters are transsexual or transgender and the process is portrayed as something common. Collado-Rodríguez states that traditional views are "denounced as conventional, worn out categories that are only used to trap the individual in the symbolic web of pre-established social roles" (10). At one point in the book, Brandy exclaims: "I'm not straight, and I'm not gay. I'm not bisexual. I want out of the labels. I don't want my whole life crammed into a single word. A story. I want to find something else, unknowable, some place to be that's not on the map. A real adventure" (261). She simply wants to live a life unbound by what's expected of her. As in Palahniuk's other novels, the characters of *Invisible Monsters* seem to be searching for their true self by discarding everything society has prescribed

them to be. We learn that Shane/Brandy's transition isn't prompted by him wanting to be a woman: "[t]he point is …. being a woman is the last thing I want. It's just the biggest mistake I could think to make. So it's the path to the greatest discovery" (258). The point of Brandy's surgery is not primarily to change genders but "to escape the labels prescribed to 'him' by society" (Ng 26).

The book's transgressions of gender and sexual identity are interlinked with the themes of self-destruction and self-mutilation. Image-altering operations and body-deforming injuries are just a way to shape one's identity into a new, more desirable one – Collado-Rodríguez writes that in *Invisible Monsters* "the body is, like the self, always in a nonstable transition toward new definitions, new roles, and new names" (10). Although artificial, this new body and identity is seen as the authentic version of a person's expression. The goal of self-mutilation is not total destruction but a shift towards something else. Andy Johnson writes that for Brandy and the narrator, "[s]elf-directed violence provides the pathway to transcendence" (Johnson 66). Like the members of *Fight Club,* the characters of *Invisible Monsters* feel that they will find personal peace only after having gone through a particularly traumatic event. In other words, they are searching for "growth through violence" (Johnson 68) because a small change within the limitations of societal expectations doesn't bring the desired effect: "It's because we're so trapped in our culture (...) We're so trapped that any way we could imagine to escape would be just another part of the trap. Anything we want, we're trained to want" (*Invisible Monsters* 259).

Pain and trauma are however not limited to the act of transformation, be it plastic surgery or a gunshot. For example, Palahniuk adopts violent-sounding words when describing Brandy's clothes – the importance of pain in her transgression is heavily reflected by the language: "A zipper thick as my spine goes up the side to just under Brandy's arm. The panels of the bodice pinch Brandy off at her waist and explode her out the top, her breasts, her bare arms and long neck" (247). Brandy comments that "[i]t's a palace of a dress … but even with the drugs, it hurts" (247). Palahniuk then continues with writing that: "The broke ends of the wire stays poke out around the neck, poke in at the waist. Panels of plastic whalebone, their corners and sharp edges jab and cut. The silk is hot, the tulle, rough. Just her breathing in and out makes the clashing steel and celluloid tucked inside, hidden, just Brandy being alive makes it bite and chew

at the fabric and her skin” (247). In this scene, we get a disturbing reminder of the lengths some women go to in their quest for attractiveness. But it’s also curious – this is a person that decried societal expectations and set out to create her own persona. This new persona is however also subject to societal pressures aimed at beautiful women. One could explain this by pointing out that she transforms these standards and constructs her own version of beauty. But she accepts these standards just the same.

The title of the novel has a deeper meaning than one might think at first. The more obvious explanation for the name “invisible monsters” is of course the motley band of the characters Palahniuk describes. Although the book presents their life choices as something common, we can still sense they are outcasts in the eyes of mainstream society. Coupled with their various body mutilations, we might think that they are the titular “invisible monsters”. Eduardo Mendieta however offers an alternate definition – invisibility is also something that one day awaits even the most physically attractive people. Because, as the old maxim goes, beauty fades. Palahniuk criticizes our modern idolatry of beauty specifically because what was once a question of appreciating symmetry and aesthetics is now hugely intensified. In our age of “mass production and simulacra” we strive to “attain a beauty that is more beautiful than beauty” (Mendieta 399). This level of perfection can be therefore achieved only through going to utmost extremes (Mandieta 399-400).

The narrator goes the opposite direction than Brandy and completely renounces her looks and lifestyle. The character explains why she decided for this major change: “I wanted to give up the idea I had any control. Shake things up. To be saved by chaos. To see if I could cope, I wanted to force myself to grow again. To explode my comfort zone” (286). Before the shooting, she was, in her own words, “addicted to being beautiful” (285). She considered obscuring her appearance in a different way but she feared she’d be persuaded to go back to her good looks: “I had to deal with my looks in a fast, permanent way or I'd always be tempted to go back” (286). With the narrator’s transformation, we are going back to the idea of major adversity as being necessary to reveal a person’s true identity. Thanks to what she calls her “makeover” (287) she feels that she is able to connect with people better because before no one saw past her beauty and didn’t regard her as a real human being. We once again encounter Palahniuk’s usual theme of presenting destruction as a constructive force. Johnson writes that the author’s

portrayal of violence is “life-affirming, an attempt to discard the distractions that separate people from others and from themselves” (71). Similarly, Andrew Ng states that “[t]he principle characters in *Invisible Monsters* perform violence upon their own bodies as a desperate resort to experience ‘aliveness’” (Ng 24). In other words, violence has the potential to connect us with other people in a meaningful way. Taken as an insular thought, this statement seems more like a joke, similar to the use of the words “life-affirming” and “aliveness” – descriptors one is not likely to use in regard to Palahniuk’s novels. But because we deal with transgressive fiction, we cannot take Palahniuk’s writing at face value. The members of *Fight Club’s* Project Mayhem willingly gave up their free wills while attempting to bring down a society that, in their eyes, told them what to do. In *Invisible Monsters*, Brandy rejects her physical identity and strongly dismisses labels of sexual orientation while wearing highly constricting and gendered outfits. But Palahniuk, along with other transgressive writers, doesn’t want to preach to us, he merely just presents us with a scenario that is supposed to make us question the sometimes excessively restricted realities of our contemporary existence.

6.2 Palahniuk’s later novels

Whereas his early works could be described as broad critiques of contemporary society (even though each of the novels concentrates on certain aspects of it slightly more than on others), Palahniuk’s later fiction tends to center on more specific environments of our culture. The characters of his later novels seem to inhabit various literary spaces and reflect a fuller spectrum of human experience. All the characters of his early novels are outsiders who try to fight repressive conditions of contemporary culture in various ways – be it with acts of civil disobedience, substance addiction, or by completely discarding one’s personal identity. The heroes of his later novels tend to be much more sure of the role they play in society even though they very often find themselves in very precarious situations. In other words, the primary aim of these characters isn’t personal discovery, they also usually have to take on their own particular problems and don’t have to fight all the repressive aspects of the whole Western society like the earlier protagonists seem to do. Self-destruction and the transforming effect it has on a person’s life, formerly a prominent part of Palahniuk’s

fiction, is slightly sidelined in his later works. We can however still find it in some of his later fiction. When discussing the development in writing of three contemporary transgressive writers – Irvine Welsh, Chuck Palahniuk, and Bret Easton Ellis – Robin Mookerjee notes that their works "stayed somewhat true to the formulae of their early bestsellers, each building a career around the style and subject matter that had made them famous" (170). It's important to note that Palahniuk's fiction hasn't changed drastically, particularly in terms of style which still remains blunt and minimalist. He somewhat broadened his themes and of course veered of in terms of genre and even the media he now uses to express himself, as evidenced by his publication of graphic novels and coloring books.

As to Palahniuk's claim that transgressive fiction has lost its place after the year 2001 – this allegation is questionable. It can be argued that his reservations about the style of writing might be due to his understanding of its definition. Transgression is too ambiguous of a concept; it is highly relative to the time and place it is written in, and it is the audience who is the driving force behind the decision if a piece of literature is transgressive or not and to what extent. As we have established, transgressive literature is hard to define, and the scholars studying the topic haven't come to an unequivocal conclusion. Most of them however seem to agree that transgressive fiction cannot be considered to be a bona fide genre. We can then argue that if transgressive fiction is not a genre, horror literature, which Palahniuk moved to, can surely still be transgressive. Not to mention the fact that the definition of a horror novel is as unclear and subjective (Ashbaugh 124). It can be argued that this ambiguity is what Palahniuk means when he talks about the reasons for why he switched to the horror genre. When asked about this change in an interview for *The Guardian*, Palahniuk stated that he likes the genre because it "deals more effectively with social issues" ("'It's Paula-nick'"). In a previous chapter, we've established that the reason for this effectiveness is, according to Palahniuk, the fact that horror literature tends to conceal its social and cultural commentary behind a stylized story. "I'm still very much in the social commentary game. I'm just not hitting people on the head with it". ("'It's Paula-nick'"). It is true that Palahniuk's later novels tend to be less schematic than their predecessors, and the author tries to be less direct with the underlying messages he wants to convey. Broadly

speaking, Palahniuk seems to have expanded his scope of interest, which is only natural for a writer to do in the course of his writing career.

In the last part of this thesis I will analyze some of Palahniuk's later works, focusing of course on the way self-destruction is portrayed in these novels. The texts I deemed to be most relevant to this theme are three of his newer novels – *Diary*, *Rant*, and *Snuff*.

6.2.1 *Diary* (2003)

Diary is the second novel in Palahniuk's series of horror novels. The story is told in a diary form, it is however unexpectedly written in the third person and is addressed to the protagonist's husband Peter who, as we later learn, lies in a coma after an alleged suicide attempt. The heroine, Misty Wilmont, is a former art student who is now, instead of having a creative job, employed as a waitress on the touristy but run-down Waytansea Island, her husband's place of birth. We learn that the island has had a string of accomplished female painters, the last two being Maura Kincaid and Constance Burton. Through her diary, we learn of Misty's humble beginnings and the hopes she had for her own future. Presently, she has no time or desire to paint – her daughter is suspected of having drowned and, on top of that, Misty is being inundated with angry messages and lawsuits from clients her husband was contracted to remodel houses for. Apparently, before his coma he got into the habit of walling off certain rooms and writing offensive messages on their walls, sentences like "…Waytansea Island will kill every last one of God's children if it means saving our own…" (27). Writing hidden messages in new buildings is supposedly an old habit of house builders but in Peter's case it got out of hand. His writing is among the few instances of anarchism in the book, the type we expect from Palahniuk's earlier heroes like Tyler Durden.

However, soon after learning about her husband's secret, Misty starts feeling creative again. She is eventually placed in the Waytansea Hotel where she is held against her will by her parents-in-law. She is being slowly poisoned and forced to paint works which are supposed to bring wealth to the community. Misty learns that she's part of a horrible tradition which repeats every four generations – a young female artist is lured to move to the island from the mainland to marry into the community. After a

couple of years, the artist's husband and children die and in the resulting turmoil, the woman produces exceptional art that has a tendency to mesmerize its observers. It is believed that the chosen young artists are reincarnations of the same spirit. This means that Misty was actually Maura Kincaid and Constance Burton in previous incarnations. During an exhibition of her paintings held in the hotel, the venue catches on fire. Instead of running away, the tourists and islanders visiting the exhibit stay there and die because they are so entranced by Misty's paintings. An insurance claim brings an enormous amount of wealth to the remaining villagers and prosperity of the community is guaranteed for the next four generations. In a self-referential twist, the last page of the book shows a letter from a Nora Adams (which is surely Misty's cover name) to Chuck Palahniuk which seems to have accompanied a copy of her diary entries. She hopes that the writer could make the story public, and that it might serve as a warning for the next victim of the curse.

Mendieta labeled *Diary* as a novel that could be described as featuring a variety of genres – apart from being a diary, it is "a mystery, a whodunit, suspense, police thriller" (Mendieta 405). He deemed it to be slightly different from Palahniuk's previous works, it's the "least bloody, pornographic, magical and improbable novel" (406). It also almost completely lacks the "kind of romantic anarchism" that readers generally expect from his novels (Mendieta 405). Simply put, it is one of the author's more realistic novels even though it features curses and predestination (Mendieta 407). But that is as sober as it gets in Palahniuk's literary universe. In her paper on the connection between American horror and the English Gothic tradition, Heidi Ashbaugh writes that *Diary* is a horror story characteristic of American culture – what many Americans fear the most is the slip into a lower socioeconomic position and that is something that happens to the Waytansea community as well as to Misty's family (Ashbaugh 125). However, the novel also undeniably features typical Gothic elements – for example, the fact that Misty sends her diary to be published in hopes it might serve as a lesson for future victims is in keeping with the tradition of Gothic heroines writing warning letters. Also, the hotel located on the Waytansea Island "with its decaying grandeur" represents the castle, a typical feature of classic Gothic novels (Ashbaugh 125). This mixing of horror elements goes back to Palahniuk being the successor of the tradition that originated with Charles Brockden Brown and Edgar Allan Poe – capturing

the spirit of the traditional Gothic writing and translating it into a typically American setting.

According to Collado-Rodríguez, one of the main themes the novel explores is the influence of art and its "capacity to modify reality" (14). Painting and writing is "condensed and mixed along its pages in the development of a story about their power of destruction but also about the possibility of redemption" (Collado-Rodríguez 14). Art has definitely a lot to do with the general theme discussed in this thesis – that of self-destruction. The front matter section of the novel's reprint from 2004 released by Vintage publishing features a collage of black-and-white pictures with the words "Where do you get your inspiration?" written over them. This is hardly incidental – inspiration is one of the biggest themes *Diary* explores. And what the novel undeniably determines to be the most potent source of inspiration is pain and suffering. Misty's doctor, who is at the same time one of her abductors, instructs her to look at "pain as a spiritual tool" (187). As an example, he tells her of all the "[p]ain and deprivation" in the history of art and self-discovery – all the "Buddhist monks" and "standing yogis", "[a]ll these mystics, throughout history, all over the world, they all found their way to enlightenment by physical suffering" (187). The doctor carries on in his description of the transforming nature of suffering: "Our misery. This suppression of our rational mind is the source of inspiration. The muse. Our guardian angel. Suffering takes us out of our rational self-control and lets the divine channel through us" (188). The language used to describe talent and creativity is downright pessimistic – when her father-in-law describes to Misty the effects of the Waytansea curse, he says that she's "doomed to fame. Cursed with talent" (242). Suffering as a source of art is of course a very stereotypical view of creativity. But according to Andrew Slade, we shouldn't take the ideas proposed by Palahniuk's characters at face value, which is a point that has resurfaced several times in the last chapter of this thesis. Slade admits that there is a great deal of irony in Palahniuk's treatment of suffering as being the greatest inspiration – just consider the name of Misty's doctor , Dr. Touchet, a clear joke on the exclamation touché (69). On the one hand, Palahniuk is clearly winking at us, telling us there's a tongue-in-cheek quality to his story. On the other hand, we have to admit that although "it's cliché to believe in the redemptive power of suffering (…) it redeems nonetheless" (Slade 69). No matter how her physical state deteriorates and how close

she's to death, Misty's painting gets better and better. "The pain and deprivation transform her from a living woman to a painting machine, bound to her bed in front of her canvas," (67) writes Slade, pointing to the fact that by the end, Misty is almost devoured by her desire to be creative.

Misty expects to eventually die, just like her predecessors Maura and Constance. But that doesn't happen. One of the explanations for that might be that her survival mirrors her discovery about the nature of art. One of the very last sentences of the book are these: "Plato was right. We are all of us immortal. We couldn't die if we wanted to" (260). These words follow Misty's decision to send her diary to be published instead of hiding it and hoping her successor would accidentally find it. By releasing it to the general public she's going to "hide her story in plain sight" (259). Misty realizes that art and creativity make us immortal; our creation lives on longer than our physical bodies do. But not after we sacrifice something of ourselves to bring it into the world. It is important to note that what *Diary* describes is not a clear instance of self-destruction, after all, Misty is essentially kidnapped and drugged. But even though it's not her choice, Misty starts to appreciate the way closeness to death stimulates her creativity.

With *Diary*, Palahniuk branches off from the usual themes of his fiction and he doesn't really take on general problems of contemporary society. There's no doubt that the novel still features transgressive elements like violence and self-sacrifice but it is focused on a very specific sphere – it is portrayed as something necessary to stimulate creativity. Palahniuk thus continues in his view of destruction as being a positive force whose ultimate goal is not annihilation, but rebirth and innovation.

6.2.2 *Rant: An Oral Biography of Buster Casey* (2007)

Rant is Palahniuk's eight novel and also the nickname of its protagonist. The rest of the title is as important to note because the novel's structure is exactly that – an oral history of the hero's life. Through contradictory views of Buster "Rant" Casey from his family, friends, enemies, critics, admirers, neighbors, and casual acquaintances alike, we piece together the tale of his life and death. We learn that he grew up in Middleton, a small town in the middle of nowhere, "four solid days of driving" (7) away from civilization. Even as a child, Rant likes to terrorize the town in various ways, most notably by contracting rabies from wild animals after which he manages to intentionally

infect most of the town. He also likes to get bitten by venomous animals like snakes and spiders. He's remarkable in other ways – he has a heightened, almost supernatural sense of taste and smell and can find objects based only on olfactory clues. When he's old enough, he decides to leave the town and his fellow citizens are rather relieved. He heads off to a big city where continues with his antics. It is when given the description of the city that we realize the story is set in a dystopian future. The society there is separated into two social classes – the orderly Daytimers and the more rebellious and nihilistic Nighttimers, a group whose enjoyment in life revolves around the "self-inflicting violence" of the so-called Party Crashing (Collado-Rodríguez 14), a nigh-time demolition derby of sorts in which the Nightimers crash into each other in crazily decorated cars. Rant continues in his perverted crusade to infect as many people as he can with rabies and he eventually manages to create a national crisis. Rant kills himself during one session of Party Crashing. However, when his friends want to retrieve the body, it is gone. This event immediately starts off the creation of mythical lore around his person. Some believe that Rant was able to travel in time because of specific circumstances that accompanied his accident. It is said that through time travel, a person can become immortal which is quite possibly something that happened to Rant.

Upon its publication, the novel garnered more or less positive reviews. The most striking feature of the text is possibly its structure – we never get the full story, only fragments of Rant's life as recounted by the people who knew him. And as can be expected of such narratives, the accounts are unreliable, details are wildly disputed, and the narrators' tales often negate each other. Palahniuk admits this himself in the author's note: "Anytime multiple sources are questioned about a shared experience, it's inevitable for them occasionally to contradict each other" (*Rant*). For some, he is "a murderer and villain, who propagated an epidemic of rabies across the whole country" while others view him as "a generous person, a leader, and a savior" (Collado-Rodríguez 14). The fact that the protagonist himself isn't the narrator gives him even more of a legendary status besides him having superhuman instincts. However, the story gets increasingly confusing, not just because of its many narrators but also by the quickly expanding story and addition of time travel at the end which is a complicated subject even in novels that are otherwise rather straightforward. Like the novels of his early career, *Rant* partly serves as a critique of consumerism in society and people's

addiction to various media. But because Palahniuk describes an alternate or near-future society, his criticism isn't as apparent as in some of his previous novels. The fact that *Rant* depicts a fictional, dystopian society makes it technically a sci-fi novel. This continues Palahniuk's direction of concentrating on genre fiction.

While not primarily focused on the topic, *Rant* features a lot of instances of self-destruction we came to expect from Palahniuk. Party Crashing, the past-time of choice for the Nighttimers, is of course the most prominent destructive and transgressive example, even though deaths associated with this sport are not as common as one would think. One person describes this hobby as "a self-directed road rage" (139). Another explanation for its role in the community is that this "ritual" provides "a cathartic release for antisocial and antiauthoritarian impulses, either exhausting those persons, crippling them, or removing them entirely via death" (*Rant* 292). In this way it is comparable to the transformational quality of fight clubs. Similarly, they also serve as a way of strengthening the community because, as one of the Party Crashers admits, "[e]ven Party Crashing can get boring if you can't find another team flying the designated flag, but at least it's a communal boredom. Like a family" (127).

Rant's life story revolves around self-destruction. His obsession with getting bitten by animals has many reasons but one of them is surviving potentially dangerous situations and trauma. One of Rant's admirers gives us an account of how the protagonist used to put his bare foot in a coyote's burrow in order to feel what the pain would be like. Rant's reasoning was simple: "[n]o matter the future, any terrible job or marriage or military service, it had to be an improvement over a coyote chomping on your foot" (72). Put in other words – putting oneself in harm makes one resilient. However, the reason for Rant's destructive behavior is not just an effort to better himself, neither is it caused by malice or misanthropy, its source is actually the dissatisfaction with his surroundings. We learn this when one of his acquaintances excuses the hero's questionable behavior because "Rant Casey wasn't evil. He was more like, he was trying to find something real in the world" (60). It was his quest for authenticity, a motivation he shares with heroes like Tyler Durden and Tender Branson. "What bothered Rant was the fake, bullshit nature of everything" (61), agrees another one of the narrators.

Rant eventually goes too far in his destructiveness and kills himself. If that is accidental or not is debatable. But by the addition of time travel, we can assume that Rant, having superior intellect and senses, might have planned his exit from this realm all along. The novel suggests that by traveling in time, a person can make him or herself immortal. Due to the complexity of the narrative, we cannot be sure if that's the case. However, we can say that he definitely lives on, at least until he is forgotten – he lives on in the stories his peers tell about him. This is a theme that is becoming quite familiar for Palahniuk's readers. Getting close to death and disappearing – this is how Rant becomes a legend, or "America's walking, talking Biological Weapon of Mass Destruction" (5). And some of the narrators are aware of the mythology that surrounds Rant and everyone he came into contact with: "The moment Rant exploded on television, the moment his car burst into flame, he became this fantastic tale we could recount about our reckless Party Crashing past. And, bathed in the flare of his gasoline limelight, we would appear mythic by association" (227).

Even though *Rant* differs from Palahniuk's other fiction in both genre and narrative structure, it still shares similarities with its predecessors. Palahniuk once again portrays self-destruction as a way to discover the elemental truths of a person's existence. It is also again depicted as a transforming force that lets an individual live through trauma and come out on the other end stronger and more resilient.

6.2.3 *Snuff* (2008)

With *Snuff*, the theme of self-destruction comes back in full force. Its four narrators take turns in telling the story of a taping of a pornographic movie that is supposed to surpass the number of partners an actress has a sexual encounter with. Three of the narrators (Mr. 600, Mr. 72, and Mr. 137) are male participants of the movie with the fourth being Sheila, an assistant of the lead actress and, as we later find out, also her daughter, with the father being Mr. 600, himself also a porn star who goes by the stage name Branch Bacardi. Little by little, each of the narrators gives us their reasons for participating in this endeavor. Interestingly, we don't get a direct narration from the star of the production, the veteran of the industry Cassie Wright. Perhaps a commentary on the manner in which women are portrayed in such movies, we learn about Cassie only through the eyes and words of others. The movie is supposed to be

Cassie's swan song, professionally but probably also personally since she expects the endeavor to kill her. She plans to bequeath all the proceeds from the movie to her child, whom she gave up for adoption and didn't reconnect with. Sheila knows the identity of her biological parents; she is actually the one who orchestrated the whole shoot in order to get revenge and her birth mother's money. Expecting that Cassie doesn't know the truth, by the end of the story, Sheila is surprised to find out that her mother knew all along that she is her long-lost daughter. She starts to feel remorseful for plotting to kill Cassie. In the last chapter narrated by Branch Bacardi, we learn the truth behind the start of Cassie's carrier – she and Bacardi were dating when they were young, but Cassie had higher ambitions for herself and wanted to leave him. When she said she would marry him only if she was really desperate, Bacardi took it as a call to action and decided to make her feel that way by drugging her soda and taping him having sex with her. After that betrayal of trust, Cassie felt that becoming a porn actress was her only choice. But luckily, she put an end to their relationship. We learn that Sheila is the result of that sexual encounter and Branch Bacardi is her father. It is at this time that comes Bacardi's turn to shoot a scene with Cassie for her last movie. We find out that a cyanide pill, which he claimed Cassie wanted him to bring, was actually meant for him. After he takes it, paramedics try to save him by using a defibrillator – unbeknownst to anyone, Cassie is still touching his body and gets electrocuted because of that. In an improbable twist, Bacardi gets resurrected and Cassie luckily doesn't die, the electricity however manages to melt off bits of their flesh which joins their bodies together in the hip area. It's at this time that Sheila decides to disclose her true identity in public and seems to have warmed up to both her parents.

The critical response to the novel was rather poor. It wasn't really criticized for its subject matter as much as for its "sluggish narrative pace" and being "boring, flat, and repetitious as pornography itself" (Collado-Rodríguez 15). It has to be noted that appropriation of the narrative conventions of the film genre could be exactly the author's intention even though that's up for debate. No matter what the case is, it can't be denied that whereas the last two novels we analyzed managed to branch off from his previous works, *Snuff* seems to go back to the style of Palahniuk's earlier prose, a decision which might have arguably been an unfortunate step on his part.

Every page of *Snuff* is interlaced with little tidbits of knowledge (the actual veracity of which isn't certain) mostly about the porn and entertainment industries, which is typical of Palahniuk's writing but it can be found most often in his early novels. While these factoids highlight the influence the sex industry has had on the mainstream culture, this time there seems to be no underlying critique of society or of an aspect of contemporary culture as was the case with his early works. Palahniuk doesn't glamorizes the porn industry, nor does he explicitly criticize it. As Sarah Churchwell writes in her review of the novel for *The Guardian*, *Snuff* "raises painful social issues - not just pornography, but rape, child abuse, exploitation and incest – only to jeer" (Churchwell).

The theme of self-destruction in *Snuff* is very prominent since it is the sole motive for Cassie Wright to make her movie. As is expected of Palahniuk's works, no one actually dies even though at this time total annihilation is really the aim of the characters' actions. Cassie clearly prepares to die – she completely cleans out her apartment and puts her things into boxes before starting the shoot and wants Sheila to put her insurance policy and royalties in order and find her estranged child. She really expects the film to be her demise, we sense that's her intention the whole time but we get a confirmation when Branch Bacardi discloses to Mr. 72 that Cassie asked him to bring her a cyanide pill to the shoot. Later, when getting her makeup and hair ready, Cassie notes that "[t]here are always worse ways to kick the bucket…" (151), this is after her litany of bizarre facts about the deaths of famous Classic Hollywood stars. She finds death as the only way she can repay her child for the affection she failed to give her: "maybe it's time I do something for my kid" (152). Apparently, financial compensations is meant to supplement a life-time of neglect.

As we find out at the very end of the book, Cassie is not the only one who wants to die during the taping of the film – Branch Bacardi seeks the same end. When we learn about the troubled past they have shared, it is revealed that he was the one who pushed Cassie into the career she is now in. Originally, she wanted to study and become a serious actress and she saw no way to do that while staying in a relationship with him. Unfortunately, Cassie discloses that she would accept Bacardi's marriage proposal only "if she was stupid and desperate, really clutching at straws and emotionally needy, utterly destroyed" (186). And he proceeds to make her feel exactly like that by

effectively raping her and releasing the record of it. He claims that the drugs he gave Cassie stopped her heart for a moment and the repetitiousness of his motions is what brings her back to life. It is a slightly heavy-handed metaphor to underline how Bacardi destroyed Cassie's old life and at the same time gave her a new one – "I ended the old life she had, wanting to act, and gave her a new life" (187). Maybe due to his feelings of guilt or because he wanted to die famous, he takes the cyanide pill himself. We get a sense that he planned it all along because he reiterates a sentence he used at the beginning of the book – "Didn't one of us on purpose set out to make a snuff movie" but this time supplementing it by adding the words "That's a lie" (188). He also probably lied about Cassie being the one who wanted the pill.

We don't know if the aim of Cassie and Branch's deaths is to end their careers while they are still on top, to provide financial security for their estranged child, because they want to achieve enduring fame, or the combination of all of the above. But even though they don't die, they are bound forever, which is clearly a metaphor for having had a child together. It is enhanced by the fact that it is at this time that Sheila really comes into their lives. Ultimately, the underlying reasons for killing themselves is that they both want to live on, either by way of their progeny or through their art. This stance corresponds with most of Palahniuk's novels that deal with the theme of self-destruction. No matter how bleak things might seem, violence and self-destruction is in the end always something that is paradoxically life-affirming.

7 Conclusion

The main aim of this thesis was to analyze the subject of self-destruction which is a frequent feature of Chuck Palahniuk's fiction. In his works, this theme tends to be portrayed as a form of civil disobedience and as a tool for dealing with social and personal problems. The importance of civil disobedience and rebelling against governing institutions has been a prominent part of American identity; this fact was of course also reflected in local literature. To be able to examine the topic properly, it was important to first explore the historical influences that shaped the view of nonconformism and resistance towards oppressive institutions.

It was the Revolutionary Period during which the United States sought freedom from the increasingly repressive British rule that significantly defined the American identity. During this time, the United States have established themselves as an autonomous country whose representatives valued the independence and nonconformity of its citizens above all else. In literature, authors like Crèvecoeur, Franklin, and Jefferson established that an American citizen is a person that isn't afraid to stand up to oppressive governments and has full control over his or her destiny. Later nicknamed the American Dream, this approach to life suggests unlimited possibilities individuals can explore in their life. In the 19th century, the spirit of individualism and nonconformism was especially prominent in the writings of Transcendentalist authors, most notably Emerson and Thoreau. Their works highlighted the importance of anti-institutionalism, free will, and independent thinking. According to them, individuals have the power to stand up to political and social oppression and change the status quo. Even though this confidence permeated America's culture, the optimism of the preceding centuries slowly waned and the second part of the 20th century saw a gradual dissatisfaction with the American Dream. The idea of progress and stability was, however, so ingrained in American culture that it left a big void in the expectations of its citizens. Naturally, literature came to be one of the paths through which people could cope with this disillusionment.

Another prominent characteristic of Palahniuk's writing are the frequent descriptions of violence. Often presented in gory details, these grotesque scenes are also deeply rooted in the US literary and cultural tradition. American literature mirrors the violent conquest of the continent – slave and captivity narratives are among the oldest

local texts written in English. Overall, American writers seem to be fascinated by violence, its roots, and impact on society. Some of the authors who often explored the topic are literary heavyweights like James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, Ernest Hemingway, or Flannery O'Connor.

Even though violence is so ingrained in the very conception of the nation, the nature of violence and the manner in which it is viewed has changed in the last decades. With terrorism and public shootings on the rise, violent attacks aren't seen as something that happens to other people – violence pushed itself into the previously safe spaces of America's middle class. This fact, coupled with the increasing distrust of government, amplified the need of writers to find new ways of expressing their discontent. This cultural crisis brought transgressive fiction to the foreground. Even though transgression has been around for centuries, it became prominent around the last decade of the 20th century. Chuck Palahniuk is one of the writers that are frequently connected with this type of literature. Lacking a proper definition, the name transgressive fiction generally denotes literary works that are in some ways violating the established conventions and expectations of a given society. This fiction then cannot be accurately defined because it heavily depends on the cultural climate it is being written in. Generally, writers of these works often employ taboo topics, explicit sexual scenes, egregious violence, and instances of self-harm as a way of shocking their readers. By writing this kind of fiction, authors like Bret Easton Ellis, Kathy Acker, and Chuck Palahniuk were able to voice the kind of existential dread that permeated America of the late 20th century.

Having explored the importance of non-conformism in American culture and establishing violence as a prominent motif of its literature, we can see that Palahniuk's treatment of self-destruction is in its way a combination of these topics. It is featured most prominently in his earlier fiction, especially his first four novels – *Fight Club*, *Survivor*, *Invisible Monsters*, and *Choke*. These novels are very similar in the topics they explore as well as the language they're written in. All of them serve as criticism of contemporary culture although in each novel Palahniuk approaches the topic from slightly different angles. This thesis presented a closer analysis of three of his early novels. Briefly summed up, *Fight Club* serves mainly as a criticism of consumerism and the uncertain position of males in contemporary society, *Survivor* aims its attention at religion and personal beliefs, and *Invisible Monsters* questions the importance society

attaches to beauty and personal identity. Despite the difference in their main focus, the thing that connect all these novels is their treatment of self-destruction. In all of them, self-destruction is offered as a way to rid oneself of social expectations which are so oppressive that simply rejecting them isn't enough. One has to renounce them forcibly and often very violently. Self-destruction is also a path to personal discovery – it is only without the influence of society and outside culture that an individual can truly find his or her authentic self.

Although Palahniuk's later works slowly evolved from the style of his previous novels, the theme of self-destruction is still present in them. In this thesis, we examined three of his later novels that deal with the topic most prominently – *Diary*, *Rant*, and *Snuff*. *Diary* and *Rant* in particular represent a departure from the type of writing Palahniuk employed in his early career. Despite the shift in the genres he explored, his stance on the transformational and cathartic nature of self-destruction seems to stay the same, even though it's maybe not voiced as obviously as in the first three novels.

Palahniuk's characters rarely die even though most of them partake in very dangerous activities. This teetering on the brink of death but ultimately not dying seems to give them a sense of authentic living. The protagonist of *Fight Club* finds peace in physical mutilation of underground battles, *Survivor* ends with the hero piloting a crumbling airplane, and most of the characters of *Invisible Monsters* mutilate their body in order to shape their appearance and the way society views them. Even though the heroine of *Diary* isn't a victim of self-inflicted violence, she definitely starts to appreciate the way closeness to death stimulates her creativity. Rant intentionally seeks pain in order to transgress his own surroundings, which he finds fake and dull. And Cassie from *Snuff* seeks to find eternal life by killing herself on camera. In all these instances, self-destruction and violence are portrayed as ultimately positive and freeing concepts.

One of the curious points of exploring Palahniuk's works was his assertion that transgressive fiction has lost its meaning after the events of 9/11, or at least temporarily. He also claims that his fiction has changed after this traumatic event. This fact can't be denied if we take into account the shift in genre his fiction took around that time. Palahniuk started focusing on writing genre fiction, specifically horror novels. In his view, genre fiction offers the author the chance to be less direct with the underlying

messages he tries to convey. It is true that he tends to be less straightforward in his social criticism in his later fiction. We can, however, definitely still find transgressive features in his novels. Self-destruction is certainly one of these themes he keeps exploring – if we understand self-destruction as being one of the features in which Palahniuk transgresses the expected norms of society in his early novels, we have to conclude that he still keeps traces of transgressive fiction it in his newer works.

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