

# The Issue of Identity in Chuck Palahniuk's Early Works

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nastavnički smjer i filozofije

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**Pitanje identiteta u ranim djelima Chucka Palahniuka**

Diplomski rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Ljubica Matek

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## **Abstract**

In his first three novels, Chuck Palahniuk explores the issues of identity and individualism in regard to various influencing factors. He finds inspiration for his characters and the revelations they come to in philosophical works of the nineteenth and twentieth century. In *Fight Club* he deals with how the historical context and class affiliation affect the formation of one's identity. For this purpose, the works of Karl Marx and Louis Althusser are consulted, particularly their take on the adversities of the workplace and state control. *Invisible Monsters* deals with the issue of having an external locus of identity. The characters in the novel only see themselves as others see them and their outward appearance is the determining factor for the realization of the self. This topic is explored through Jean Baudrillard's writings on simulacrum and simulation in which he explores the relation between that which is real and that which is a symbol or a sign of the real, and Marshall McLuhan's interpretation of the role that the media plays in the concealment of truth. In *Survivor* the development of individual identity is brought to a halt through discipline and control within an ostensibly religious cult. How this type of panoptic life, which is organized to the last minute detail, affects one's individuality or, rather, a lack thereof, is explored with the help of Michel Foucault's writings on discipline, transgression, and sexuality.

**Keywords:** identity, Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters*, *Survivor*.

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## Introduction

This paper deals with the exploration of the issues of identity formation in the first three novels written by Chuck Palahniuk. He writes characters that are so unlike anyone else because of their state of mind and of what they have decided to do with their lives, which makes them feel alone and unloved. However, upon closer inspection, their circumstances let the reader know that they are not that different from anyone else. What accounts for the difference and, therefore, for the shock and awe they inspire, is how uniquely they handle their situation. It is the purpose of this paper to try to analyze the characters in Palahniuk's novels as they attempt to establish their identity and get a sense of self unbound by the context of their circumstances to ultimately conclude if the individual has a say in the making of the self and, if so, to what extent. These characters and their ordeals are explored with the help of philosophical texts from the nineteenth and twentieth century.

In the first chapter, titled "The Self and Identity in Chuck Palahniuk's Works", the paper shows that the topic of identity is not uncommon for Palahniuk's literary fiction. Furthermore, general definitions of identity as such and the thoughts on the issue by Stuart Hall, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and Søren Kierkegaard are provided.

The second chapter is concerned with the novel *Fight Club*. The first subchapter, titled "History and Class Issues", deals with the protagonist's need to free himself and the world of a historical context and the effects of economy on the conditions of the individual and the lack of any kind of stimulus for one to resist the arbitrary rules of society and state. In the second chapter, titled "Multiple Personalities and Individuality", the issue of having a split personality is explored and how it affects one's sense of self.

The third chapter has to do with the novel *Invisible Monsters*. The first subchapter, titled "The Body as a Prison and a Source of Identity", deals with the grave influence that the visual aspect of one's appearance has on the creation of their identity and their own perception of who they are. The second subchapter, titled "Simulacrum of Experience", depicts how the falsity of living as an image or a symbol of an inexistent original makes it nearly impossible for an individual to ever be anything more than a copy.

The focus of the fourth chapter is on the novel *Survivor*. The first subchapter, titled "Control and Discipline", illustrates the enclosed, encapsulated life within a seemingly religious colony that keeps its members under close surveillance and has complete control over their lives, as well as their deaths. The second subchapter, titled "Sex as Sin and Transgression", seeks to provide an answer and an escape from the issues dealt with in the previous subchapter. Sexual experience

and the transgression of the limits set by the church, or parental limits, are portrayed as the only way one can ever truly experience freedom and elude the grasp of a corrupt system.

## 1. The Self and Identity in Chuck Palahniuk's Works

In an interview published in an anthology dedicated to Chuck Palahniuk's work entitled *Sacred and Immoral: On the Writings of Chuck Palahniuk*, Palahniuk stated that, having read a lot of philosophy, he writes his fiction in such a way as to reach and attain the philosophical concepts found in works by Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Marshall McLuhan, and such (98). It is no wonder then that his works both tackle the same issues that philosophy does and make for a challenging reading.

Following that, the question of the self and, therefore, of one's identity is a central theme in many of Palahniuk's works, as is the case with his first three novels: *Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters*, and *Survivor*. Each of these novels explores the identity of its protagonists in different and newly disturbing ways. In *Stranger Than Fiction: True Stories*, Palahniuk says that all his books are "about a lonely person looking for some way to connect with other people" (ch. 1). Out of this loneliness each person finds their own way to define themselves, whether it is through the utmost destruction of who they are, thus creating complete freedom of becoming anyone at all, or through the attempt at fabricating a persona out of the stunted remains of a character.

Identity, which is a word derived from the Latin *identitas* meaning "sameness," is defined by the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* as "the relation each thing bears only to itself". In "Introduction: Who Needs Identity", Stuart Hall uses the term "to refer to the meeting point, the point of *suture*, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken'" (5-6). These are the discourses and practices which bring us into being, which provide us with an identity in the way of interruption through speech. It was Louis Althusser who described interpellation as the process by which social and political ideology constitutes the nature of individual subjects' identities, and it is from his work *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* that the term stems.

Following this line of thought, Hall describes identities as "the positions which the subject is obliged to take up while always 'knowing' that they are representations, that representation is always constructed across a 'lack', across a division, from the place of the Other, and thus can never be adequate – identical – to the subject processes which are invested in them" (6). In a way, we are forced to become something suitable for a given context, to embrace a certain identity or, as Hall would say, have the subject be hailed by discourse. Michel Foucault's

approach is somewhat more radical in that he claims that “the subject is produced ‘as an effect’ through and within discourse, within specific discursive formations, and has no existence, and certainly no transcendental continuity or identity from one subject position to another” (qtd. in Hall 10). Foucault hereby rejects the possibility of a singular and fixed identity for each person. It is through continuing discourse that the self can be defined, that is through communicating oneself to others. Individuals act upon themselves and, in that way, create various forms of their identity.

In addition to this, while talking about life and its authenticity, Palahniuk mentions Søren Kierkegaard in relation to taking control over one’s own life and states: “You can live Kierkegaard’s inauthentic life. Or you 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 you should be” (*Stranger than Fiction* ch. 21). It is about how people will always do what they are told not to do, what they believe is forbidden and should not be done, because only in that way can they prove to themselves that they are free. By inauthentic life Palahniuk and Kierkegaard mean the life limited not by that which is impossible, but by that which is illegal. This idea of inauthentic living is precisely what drives Palahniuk’s characters to throw away the shackles of worldly rules and create their own rules, their own lives, and their own explanations of the world.

## 2. *Fight Club*

The novel *Fight Club* would have been Palahniuk's second novel had *Invisible Monsters* not been rejected by the publishers for being "too disturbing" (Rocha 30). *Fight Club* deals with identity through the prism of historical materialism and Marxism, suggesting largely that individual identity is constructed in relation to the society's economic ideology.

### 2.1. History and Class Issues

In his 1996 satirical novel, *Fight Club*, Palahniuk depicts a deprived, self-medicating world of rejects. These are lonely individuals who attempt to find company in IKEA furniture catalogues. They try to make themselves believe that the cubicle they work in is what provides them with security and what gives their lives meaning. They look for human contact in single's bars and online chat rooms to try to feel something other than sheer living through another wretched, tediously dull day. Tyler Durden, the novel's protagonist and the alter-ego of the narrator whose real name we never learn, believes that these individuals, who are completely insignificant alone, can make a difference together. In fact, together, they should make a difference.

The problem with the world, as Tyler Durden sees it, is that "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" (Palahniuk 149). He claims that "we don't have a great war in our generation or a great depression, but we do have a great war of the spirit" (Palahniuk 149). What he is saying is that the late twentieth century generation has been raised by television and commercials. People were led to believe that they can all be famous and rich and successful, when in fact they cannot. They are slowly becoming aware of this and it is making them angry. This creates great psychological turmoil which makes for the spiritual war Durden is talking about. Individually, people are nothing, but together they can make a difference. What they are meant to rebel against is the capitalist culture because it has turned people into a mass of identical consumers. In the literary sense, this is reflected in the alleged postmodern lack of "great stories" which is often seen as a consequence of the alleged unimportance and emptiness of the contemporary lifestyle. The notion was introduced by Jean-François Lyotard in 1979 who suggested that, after the Second World War, humanity has lost the need for grand narratives and a universal theory (of anything) became inadequate. This view shattered the idea of a general "truth" and little narratives have been introduced to explain social

problems. This, in turn, required people to find individual ways (or stories) to legitimate their life, their existence, and their identity (xxiii-xxv).

In Chuck Palahniuk's own words, the protagonist and narrator of *Fight Club*, similarly to most Palahniuk's characters, is "suspicious of his own desire to succeed and isolate himself. He's had a taste of success and the isolation it buys" (Kavanagh 187), which is portrayed through the beautifully furnished and decorated apartment he owns, "and he realizes isolation will destroy him. So, he destroys his own 'success' and forces himself back into the community with other people" (Kavanagh 187). This he does through Tyler Durden, who takes over when the narrator falls asleep, so to say, and becomes an observer of what his body is doing, that is of what Tyler is doing. But Tyler goes beyond simply being part of a community. He transforms the community into a coercive force named Project Mayhem with the singular goal of a "complete and right-away destruction of civilization" (Palahniuk 125). He wants to "teach each man in the project that he has the power to control history" (Palahniuk 122). Tyler's plan is at the same time violent and symbolic as he intends to destroy history itself by toppling down a massive office tower in order for it to crush the national museum below it, which is the embodiment of history. This way, we can let go of the lies our forefathers told us and create a world of our own. Tyler wants to make the world "hit bottom" (Palahniuk 123) and "blast the world free of history" (Palahniuk 124), which for him is not simply a record of the past, but a result of manipulating ideologies. Moreover, echoing Lyotard's idea of a lack of great stories, he perceives his peers as the middle children of history, which is a concept that means having no great cause to live for or rebel against: "We are middle children of history, raised by television to believe that someday we'll be millionaires and movie stars and rock stars, but we won't. And we're just learning this fact. ... So don't fuck with us" (Palahniuk 166).

In his erratic rampage, Tyler makes another great point which is to show us exactly what puts us, as the middle children of history, in control. The people serving dinner and making beds are in control. The people who direct calls, who pump gas, who tailor suits, who deliver to doors, the people who serve and protect, are in control. This is what it means when Tyler claims that individually people are nothing. If all these people who run everyone's lives while they are asleep make a collective effort, anyone's life could be ruined in an instant. And that is what Tyler wants to open the world's eyes to. People have all been turned into slaves of the workplace. The way this is done, according to Karl Marx, is through the exchange of commodities, wherein a "commodity is directly a means of exchange to its owner, and to all other persons an equivalent, but that only in so far as it has use-value for them" (Marx 45). Thus the owner of the workplace alienates the worker from the product he makes turning it into a

source of profit for himself and denying the worker any fruit of his labor, other than being paid an insignificant amount compared to the actual worth of the product. Therefore, their work is their prison and it transforms them into passive onlookers and passers-by. People are happy, or else they lead themselves to believe they are happy, because they were brainwashed into believing having a job is all that matters. So they are happy doing jobs they hate and doing nothing to fight their enslavers, to fight those who exploit them for their own personal gain.

And, since no one really cares or even pays attention to the worker, to the everyday individual, that individual is, in a way, free to do almost anything. How he or she makes himself or herself absolutely free is by ridding himself or herself of all worldly possessions and attachments. As Tyler says: “it’s only after you’ve lost everything ... that you’re free to do anything” (Palahniuk 70). So, as a first step toward a general rebellion, the narrator burns down his apartment with all of the furniture he so meticulously picked out and purchased. He does it as Tyler but Tyler is in fact the narrator’s alter ego who does what the narrator is incapable of doing or too afraid to do. In any case, the narrator has made himself hit bottom, just as he wants to do with the world, so that it could start all over again.

Tyler often repeats statements similar to this one: “We are God’s middle children, ... with no special place in history and no special attention. Unless we get God’s attention, we have no hope of damnation or redemption” (Palahniuk 141). So, he does not want to make a name for himself. He wants this for his entire generation. He wants all the nameless men and women, who are stuck in dead end jobs, to overcome their middle children status and, since no one cares about them, fend for themselves. He wants them to get God’s attention. Because “only if we’re caught and punished can we be saved” (Palahniuk 141). The reason why Tyler repeats himself so often and gives speeches about the state of the world and the goals of Project Mayhem is because he is creating an ideology, and ideology is what moves individuals to act.

Palahniuk draws from Louis Althusser’s post-Marxist conception of ideology and uses these ideas as motivational tools for his characters. In the book *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* Althusser states that “exploitation [of the working class] has practically become repression” (178). This repression is what Tyler is fighting against by creating an ideology so that the working class can rally around it. He named it Project Mayhem and told them that it is “going to save the world” (Palahniuk 125). It “will force humanity to go dormant or into remission long enough for the Earth to recover. ... Like fight club does with clerks and box boys, Project Mayhem will break up civilization so we can make something better out of the world” (Palahniuk 125).

The achievement of a feat this big, however, requires victims, which is what Jacques Mallet du Pan asserted in the eighteenth century by suggesting that revolution devours its children. Accordingly, one of the perpetrators of Project Mayhem, Robert Paulson, dies during one of their missions of obliteration. This serves as a trigger for the narrator to stop sitting idly by and observing. He begins protesting against all of it, against the members of the Project, against Tyler, and against himself. The others do not take him seriously because, to them, he *is* Tyler Durden. They know him as a slightly deranged individual, believe all sorts of ridiculous myths about him, and respect and worship him. So, when he starts asking questions and tries to fight them, they think it is just some kind of test or him simply being the eccentric he is. And, as he watches them chant “His name is Robert Paulson” (Palahniuk 178), he realizes that what he has started, what he and Tyler have started, cannot be stopped. It had gone beyond him, beyond a singular leader. Fight clubs all around the world, and Project Mayhem with them, became a unified organism, living, breathing, and working on its own. The man and the idea had long become obsolete. What survived is the ideology, an abuse of the idea, as it always does.

Earlier in the novel, Tyler explains the need for human sacrifice using animal sacrifice as an equivalent: “Think about the animals used in product testing. Think about the monkeys shot into space. ‘Without their death, their pain, without their sacrifice,’ ... ‘we would have nothing’” (Palahniuk 78). Tantamount to animals being used for the betterment of the human condition, people inevitably die during wars fought for an ideological concept. Tyler sees this as a necessity because only by doing something drastic can capitalism and a purposeless society be rescinded. So, it is capitalist ideology that Tyler sees as nothingness, while Althusser describes it as “an imaginary representation of individuals’ imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence” (181). This imaginary representation of reality is what arises out of advertising and consumerism, which are the two pillars of a mindless, docile, proletarian society. As Tyler puts it: “You don’t understand any of it, and then you just die” (Palahniuk 12). All the while, those who have the authority of knowledge, those in control, the bourgeoisie, look down upon the common man and see him as completely unimportant or even as a nuisance. Tyler has a simple message for them: “Remember this. ... The people you’re trying to step on, we’re everyone you depend on. ... We drive the ambulances. We direct your call. We are cooks and taxi drivers and we know everything about you. We process your insurance claims and credit card charges. We control every part of your life” (Palahniuk 166).

These resonating words serve as a simple reminder to both classes. They remind the rich that they would not be where they are, were it not for the working class. Also, the working class is reminded that it has the power to overthrow the rich from their high chairs. The only thing

keeping the worker from open rebellion is fear produced by ideology, by beautiful lies, as Plato called them. And now they have Tyler to show them they are blinded by false causes and an elusive sense of security. Althusser states that “ideology is an imaginary assemblage, a pure dream, empty and vain, constituted by the 'diurnal residues' of the only full, positive reality, that of the concrete history of concrete, material individuals materially producing their existence” (254) or, in Tyler’s simpler words: “The things you used to own, now they own you” (Palahniuk 44). By liberating oneself from material possessions and dependence on them, there is nothing holding one down and forcing them to heed some made up rules that only benefit the rich and powerful. Tyler’s endgame is the same as one of Marxist “classics”, as can be found in Althusser: “the proletariat must seize state power in order to destroy the existing bourgeois state apparatus. In a first phase, the phase of the dictatorship of the proletariat, it must replace it with an utterly different, proletarian state apparatus, before going on, in later phases, to set a radical process in motion, the destruction of the state” (74).

If we consider the possibility of someone like Tyler and his group of rebels actually succeeding in their goal, which is the utter and complete annihilation of civilized society in order to make it start all over again, a potential problem arises. The construction of the new civilization would now be in the hands of the working class, in “the hands of representatives of the proletariat and its allies, who [would now] hold state power, that is to say, control the state's apparatuses. This is the state of the dictatorship of the proletariat” (Althusser 151). Would that not mean that not only would we not achieve a classless society, the roles would simply be reversed, and the oppressed would become the oppressors? And, if a class war was started, could it ever be brought to a close? Althusser would say the following: “What *decides* it is whether state power remains in the hands of the bourgeoisie or is seized by the proletariat. That, however, is the culminating point of a very long battle, an incessant, daily, extraordinarily difficult battle, a sort of interminable trench warfare that can never be abandoned and is usually masked by the spectacular political battles in the foreground” (127-128).

What Tyler fails to take into account is that bringing everything down to zero would mean complete devastation, not just for the rich, but for the poor as well. It is true that together they are strong and they could take control, but if they were to start this war it would turn into nothing but complete anarchy. Once a mass of people starts moving, it is hard, if not impossible, to stop it. What the world needs is an age of intellect, not another age of raw strength. Intellect is what should replace money and politics. Intellect is what should rule and care for society.

Tyler’s way of changing things would take us back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s state of nature where survival belongs to those with bigger muscles and more powerful weapons. Goals

of Project Mayhem are exactly that - mayhem, with nothing to follow. Without a plan for a new state order, the destruction of civilization would leave the world in ruins and such a world would ultimately collapse into itself, and any kind of individual identity formation would crumble with it. It is exceptionally easy to destroy something and it is remarkably difficult to create and construct it back again from the ruins.

Tyler is simply acting out of his discontentment with life and society, without generating a vision of a new, better, just society. The fact that he thinks himself a middle child of history, without a great war or a great cause to fight for, is a demonstration of his boredom. He does not know what to do with himself, let alone with the world. He was right about one thing. All these clerks and box boys, waiters and deliverymen, do have the power to take control over history. They have the power to build a new, different, and better world. And the only thing Tyler used that power for is destruction. He wreaked havoc unto himself so he had to spread it to others.

Althusser found the same issues with class warfare and claimed that intellectuals would not have a problem freeing themselves from the shackles of consumerism and material possessions, because they are “'conscious' of their alienation” (125). Unfortunately, intellectuals only “think they are leading [the crusade of change]; however, since it is a mass movement, it eludes their grasp” (Althusser 178). Just as soon as the proletariat would seize control, it would undoubtedly lose it within the chaos and anarchy that would ensue. Even though there is a “necessity of a break with the dominant capitalist system at the precise point of this system's constitutional fragility” (Balibar XV), “law is by itself incapable of guaranteeing the reproduction or stabilization of the dominant social relations” (Balibar XIII). This means that mayhem cannot be restrained, therefore mayhem is not the solution. Even though change is necessary, it cannot be brought forth by the harassed and the weary. Only someone detached from hatred and greed can begin to introduce a change: a change that is long overdue.

## **2.2. Multiple Personalities and Individuality**

With the words “Tyler had been around a long time before we met” (Palahniuk 32) the narrator acknowledges the existence of his other personality even before he “went with it” to the extent of actually having the two communicate with each other and, in a way, lead their own separate lives. Naturally, they could not stay separate for long because one of them needed to be in control, which is what led them to threaten each other and, ultimately, even kill each other. This is what we are led to believe after the narrator shot himself through the cheek: that Tyler

was “killed” and the narrator is the one who survived as he lay in the mental hospital on the last pages of the novel.<sup>1</sup>

Even though the narrator himself created this other person, the person who did what the narrator was incapable of doing, who found new, ridiculous, and even dangerous ways of making money and surviving, who created a romantic relationship with a woman when the narrator had never been able to do so, he had no idea of this being the case until Tyler himself explained that they “use the same body, but at different times” (Palahniuk 164). He told him: “We’re not two separate men. Long story short, when you’re awake, you have the control, and you can call yourself anything you want, but the second you fall asleep, I take over, and you become Tyler Durden” (Palahniuk 167).

With the remark “you can call yourself anything you want” (167) Tyler is referring to the fact that the narrator always uses a different name when visiting support groups, in an attempt to cure his insomnia. He even gives a fake name to Marla, also “a tourist” in the support groups, a woman he ends up falling in love with. This is why Tyler calls him an “inauthentic shit” (Palahniuk 168) in accordance with Kierkegaard’s definition of authenticity according to which “an authentic, fully realized individual is one who is unified from within, whose actions are one, and who accepts responsibility for his commitments” (qtd. in Moore xxi), which means that the narrator certainly is not an authentic individual and his own alter-ego ridicules him because of it.

After explaining to Marla who he really is and showing her the driver’s license bearing his true name, the narrator offers an explanation of how Tyler came to be:

I was tired and crazy and rushed, and every time I boarded a plane, I wanted the plane to crash. I envied people dying of cancer. I hated my life. I was tired and bored with my job and my furniture, and I couldn’t see any way to change things. Only end them. I felt trapped. I was too complete. ... I wanted a way out of my life. ... Tyler Durden is a separate personality I’ve created, and now he’s threatening to take over my real life. (Palahniuk 172-173).

At a time in history when no “great” things are happening, where there is nothing that the future generations will learn about in school, when the economy is failing, and capitalism in America is in full swing, people must ask themselves what type of identity one can build for oneself; what defines them in this time in history, if people of today are still the so-called

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, Palahniuk’s graphic novel *Fight Club 2* (2016) makes it clear that this is not the case, but this is not relevant for the purposes of this paper.

“middle children”, as Palahniuk called the generations of the 1990’s, and if the reason that there are no great stories today is that there are no remarkable individuals, and that people are mostly just trying to blend in and not stand out. Tyler seems to provide the reader with an answer to these questions. He fashions himself into a “great” individual, regardless of whether he is, in layman’s terms, good or bad, because he is *doing* instead of just being. The narrator, who could in any given moment be any one of us, says this much about his other personality: “I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts. His nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent, and men look up to him and expect him to change the world. Tyler is capable and free, and I am not. I’m not Tyler Durden” (Palahniuk 174). In reality, no one is.

As foretold by Justin Garrison, “longing for a better world while living in one that is disappointing is a permanent feature of human existence” (102). Such is the case for all of us who do not belong to the privileged one percent. Most of twenty-first century people are too underwhelmed, too underappreciated, or too apathetic to do anything about the hopelessness that is their lives. This is the state of things that drives the rebellious to move. The so-called “metaphysical rebellion is ultimately a self-defeating attempt to satisfy the desire for meaning in an uncertain world” (Garrison 100-101), and the world stubbornly refuses to provide it. After a person has been on their own for a long time, fully alienated from the rest of humanity, sooner or later they get the urge to reestablish contact with other people, which is what our narrator uniquely does via an imagined personality that is Tyler Durden, and through him is how he interacts with the world. He talks to people as Tyler, he makes money and love as Tyler, and he leads others as Tyler, but “the longer the Tyler personality is in control, the further the narrator’s consciousness fades away” (Garrison 94). Ultimately, he is forced to fight himself and, if such a thing is even possible, win in order to reaffirm his own self and sense of identity.

According to Foucault, he need not worry because identity is not fixed; it is rather “a discourse that is mediated by our interactions with others” (qtd. in Urbanski 4). Through this discourse-mediated identity, Foucault negates the “sameness” that is usually associated with any attempt at defining identity and talks of the “various relationships we have with ourselves” and these are relationships of “differentiation, of creation, of innovation” (qtd. in Urbanski 5). In other words, the self is not an unchanging, unitary thing. If that were the case no one would be able to improve anything, no one could ever go from bad to good, or vice versa. Foucault’s ethics of transgression arises from a balance of restriction and independence: “Too much of oneself constraints ethics and the freedom of a multitude of voices propels an ethic of action. On the other hand, an unbridled collection of voices can be just as restrictive” (qtd. in Urbanski 8).

This new kind of being that Foucault's technology of the self suggests, in short, "getting free of oneself" (qtd. in Urbanski 8), is exactly what the narrator did when he invented and essentially became Tyler Durden. He embodied Foucault's claim that the subject "is not a substance but a form ... [that] is not always identical to itself" (Campbell 3).

To better understand Foucault's discussions of the subject, Olga Campbell-Thomson offers three key points. The first one is that "the subject and its various forms and identities are constructed rather than discovered" (5) which would mean that a phrase such as "that is just how I am" bears no value because we are not simply born a certain way and are susceptible to change. The second point regards the fact that our identities are "historical and cultural constructions", meaning that "there is no autonomous transcendent subject which exists outside its context" (5), so all of our actions are defined and limited by our social and historical context. This would mean that, even though we can change to a certain point, this changing cannot be indeterminate. Thirdly, the subject is "constantly modified", which is in accordance with the first point of the construction of the subject.

The novel's narrator has been molded into being like all the other cubicle-occupying people around him by the world he happens to live in, by the time he was born in, and by the place on Earth he grew up in. He is an individual like all the others in the consumerist world, caring about the furnishings of his high-rise condominium and the color of the icons on his desktop computer. A screaming, raging collapse of such a lack of individuality had to happen sooner or later and that is how what manifests in teenagers as crazy hair colors and piercings turned him into two separate individuals, where his original self took to the sidelines and observed as the new individuality, the rule-breaking, soap-making, loud-laughing Tyler Durden, reclaimed ownership and control over all agency. What a freedom it must be to simply let go and just become whoever so fully that by the time one realizes what has happened it might be too late to go back to one's initial self.

### 3. *Invisible Monsters*

In 2012, thirteen years after the publication of the original novel, *Invisible Monsters*, Chuck Palahniuk released a hardcover edition of the book titled *Invisible Monsters Remix* which represents “a restructured version of the novel” and it contains new chapters, “a new author's introduction”, and “instructions on which chapter to read next” (Widmyer). In the continuation of this paper only the 1999 version of the novel will be taken into account. Unlike *Fight Club*, which focuses on the ideological and economical constructions of identity, *Invisible Monsters* deals with the body as our primary vessel of identification and identity creation.

#### 3.1. The Body as a Prison and a Source of Identity

In the novel *Invisible Monsters*, the narrator is a woman or, as she later refers to herself, the girl with the shotgunned face. Through her storytelling, the reader learns of the lives and tribulations of three former fashion models, one of which is a transgender woman, and a man who travels with them across America. Each day, they adopt new faux identities and pretend they are interested in real estate when all they really want is to steal make-up and any kind of medicine left over from previous owners. To do that, one of them distracts the real estate agent with one of many extravagant and ridiculous stories which are usually thought up by Brandy Alexander, the transgender woman who took the narrator, Shannon, “under her wing” after she ended up in the hospital because of a shotgun wound to the face.

These women are products of years of mutilations, aesthetic operations and other various kinds of physical enhancements. So much so, that they do not even feel human anymore as Shannon suggests: “Shotgunning anybody in this room would be the moral equivalent of killing a car, a vacuum cleaner, a Barbie doll. Erasing a computer disk. Burning a book. Probably that goes for killing anybody in the world. We're all such products” (Palahniuk 3). Each of these characters is defined by their outward appearance. They are bound by how the world sees them and how they feel they ought to be, how they ought to look and behave. The cause for this is the need to connect to other people and to get the desperately needed approval from society, and yet with everything they do they are furthering themselves from any semblance of caring human contact. They yearn for somebody to love them all the while having trouble loving themselves.

Moreover, all of these characters are, in their own way, damaged and find fitting in to be utterly challenging. So, they stick together and make each other's lives miserable. For example, “Brandy Alexander and the way she looked turned the rest of the world into virtual reality”

(Palahniuk 14). Her obviously masculine hands are “the one part about Brandy Alexander the surgeons couldn’t change” (Palahniuk 6). She is “the long-stemmed latte queen supreme of the top-drawer party girls” (Palahniuk 2) who fashioned herself the name of a cognac based cocktail which only goes to show that who she used to be is not extravagant enough or prominent enough for her.

In regard to their other female companion, Shannon says that “you can trace everything about Evie Cottrell's look back to some television commercial for an organic shampoo” (Palahniuk 2) and describes the relationship among the three of them as a “power struggle for the spotlight” (Palahniuk 4). Being models, they are aware of the fact that people only see them as beautiful shells and no one is quite interested in what is on the inside. They are beautiful and dumb, lower life forms, created to sell product and look perfect. The only mirrors they are truly familiar with are the television, the billboard, the magazine, or a spinning platform. They only see themselves as others see them and feel nothing is worth doing unless someone is watching because having witnesses makes it real. “You can say anything if enough people will listen” (Palahniuk 24) and what no one has heard simply does not matter.

Connections could be drawn here to Foucault’s description of how punishment was doled out in the eighteenth century. It was a public spectacle, a ceremony, for everyone to witness. Also, it was always the body that was being punished, until such things as the scaffold were starting to be seen as atrocities, so the government started attacking the souls instead (*Discipline and Punish* 103-131). These women abuse their bodies the same way, punishing themselves for certain terrible crimes they feel guilty for, and only after they realize that everyone else is as equally disturbed and has done something that they are trying to hide do they start coming to terms with who they are and that they just might deserve love after all.

The man traveling with them is called Manus and he used to be Shannon’s boyfriend, before he cheated on her with Evie, which is why she says “I still love him so much I’ll hide any amount of conjugated estrogen in his food. So much I’ll do anything to destroy him” (Palahniuk 49). Later on, the readers learn that Manus used to be a police officer who had an affair with her, at the time, underage brother. The only reason Manus ever dated Shannon was that she reminded him of her brother, Shane. They were “almost the same height, born one year apart. The same coloring. The same features” (Palahniuk 71). The brother ended up killing himself because their parents renounced him for being gay and having AIDS. Shannon has spent years feeling guilty for never standing up for her brother or trying to learn what it was he needed, unaware of the fact that Shane had been next to her ever since she shot herself in the face, an act for which she allowed Evie and Manus to blame each other. In fact, the fabulous, long nailed, ring beaded,

hair-poofed Brandy Alexander was her brother Shane: “Brandy was my dead brother and the person he wants to love him is me, his hateful sister, already plotting to kill him” (Palahniuk 64).

Watching Brandy now, Shannon realizes something she has never been able to put her finger on until now: “I know what it is I loved about her. What I love is myself. Brandy Alexander just looks exactly the way I looked before the accident” (Palahniuk 71). The accident being Shannon with a shotgun in a car: “I’m so tired of being me. Me beautiful. Me ugly. Blonde. Brunette. A million fucking makeovers that only leave me trapped being me. ... What I need is a story about who I am” (Palahniuk 79). And yet, each and every one of them thinks the story is about them. Evie is actually a man, which goes to show that nothing in the fashion world is what it looks like, Manus is obviously gay, given that he had love connections with men, women who reminded him of those men, and women who used to be men, Shane hurt himself by lighting a can of hairspray on fire, and Shannon, tired of being a thing, a product, blew her own face off: “The truth is nobody here is as stupid or evil as I let on. Except me” (Palahniuk 100).

They were trapped in the bodies they used to have, and now they are trapped in the bodies they fashioned for themselves. Shannon explains this state similarly to how the narrator of *Fight Club* describes it: “I was tired of staying a lower life form just because of my looks. Trading on them. Cheating. Never getting anything real accomplished, but getting the attention and recognition anyway. Trapped in a beauty ghetto is how I felt. Stereotyped. Robbed of my motivation” (Palahniuk 101). So, she tried to take another path: “The truth is, being ugly isn’t the thrill you’d think, but it can be an opportunity for something better than I ever imagined” (Palahniuk 102). The idea of being tired of who we are is an underlying theme in many Palahniuk’s novels, one of them being the aforementioned *Fight Club*. In both of these novels, the characters are tired of living in a world of appearances, where nothing is as it seems, where things only look a certain way because of some political or financial agenda, and the individual loses all of his individuality and is only used as a tool to achieve the means of said agenda.

With everything superficial, “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). Through mutilation and constant change Palahniuk’s characters try to achieve a new and inspired way of the authenticity of life. Andrew Slade describes the monsters of *Invisible Monsters* as “fascinating and frightening” (70). They are fascinating because they are castaways and they are free, but they are frightening because they could be us.

One can never know when and how societal pressures might force them to take a certain aspect of their lives to the extreme, like how these fashion models “take the prescriptions of the beauty to their monstrous end” (Slade 70). Everyone has that “face” they show to the world, that

façade that they carry around to protect themselves with. It is only a question of how far one is willing to go in altering that mask. The other option being shooting themselves in the face and spending the rest of their lives covered in veils thus avoiding ever being commended for nonexistent achievements simply because of how they look. In a world that, on its own, lacks authenticity, how can an individual find it for themselves if not via extreme measures?

### 3.2. Simulacrum of experience

In a society wherein all reality, according to Baudrillard, has been replaced with symbols and signs of things that used to be there but are not anymore, the characters of *Invisible Monsters* have themselves become representations of nonexistent originals or, to use Palahniuk's expression, "copies of copies of copies" (3). In his work *Simulacrum and Simulation*, Baudrillard states: "The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory - precession of simulacra - that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map" (3). This concept of simulacrum, which, according to the *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*, stems from the Latin word *simulare*, originating in the sixteenth century, is illustrated in the novel by the attempt of an individual to adjust their body to reach an unattainable ideal, wherein this endlessly manipulated image of the model refers to no actual original individual. Palahniuk "seeks a mode to present events of survival in a culture that militates for conformity to simulacra of experiences, to consume them as we would our prepackaged food or Ikea catalogues" (Slade 64).

Slade understands Palahniuk's character depictions as "sublime figurations of the imperative *to be*, even if his characters are imperfect at actualizing this ontological and existential imperative" (64). It is an issue of surviving the culture and its ideals, of going through "that which does not kill you, only makes you stronger" to being alive when it is all over. It is an issue of "presenting the unrepresentable" (Slade 65) while dealing with the pain and the improbability of it.

For this reason, the characters in the novel accept whatever story Brandy thinks of. They go along with playing whichever role is presented to them because the alternative is too painful. Brandy explained that being a woman is not what she desired to become: "It's just the biggest mistake I could think to make" (Palahniuk 91). Shannon explains how the life led by Brandy makes her feel: "Some days, I hate it when Brandy changes our lives without warning. Sometimes, twice in one day, you have to live up to a new identity. A new name. New

relationships. Handicaps. It's hard to remember who I started this road trip being" (Palahniuk 21). Ever since her "accident", Shannon has not been able to speak. She just floats alongside them like a ghost hidden behind her veils and pretends to have a different kind of disease and a different identity because it is clear to her that is the only way for her to survive in the world, being the way she is: "Take-charge princess who she is, Brandy Alexander never does ask my real name. The name who I was born. Miss Bossy Pants right away gives me a new name, a new past. She invents another future for me with no connections, except to her, a cult all by herself" (Palahniuk 37).

The characters are plagued by being something other than themselves, constantly changing the circumstances of their existence, and under these circumstances the reality of anything becomes more and more distant: "Behind another veil, the real world is that much farther away" (Palahniuk 38). Similarly to how Marx's workers are alienated from their work and from each other, Baudrillard speaks of how the world has changed and true human relations have diminished: "People no longer look at each other, but there are institutes for that. They no longer touch each other, but there is contactotherapy. They no longer walk, but they go jogging, etc. Everywhere one recycles lost faculties, or lost bodies, or lost sociality, or the lost taste for food" (*Simulacrum* 11). So, for example, Shannon feels almost inanimate behind her veils: "I'm an invisible nobody sitting on a white damask sofa facing another white sofa across a coffee table that looks like a big block of malachite from Geology 101" (Palahniuk 54). She no longer differentiates herself from the objects around her; the sofa, the table, the person – everything and everyone is simply there: "Honey, times like this, it helps to think of yourself a sofa or a newspaper, something made by a lot of other people but not made to last forever. ... It helps to know you're not any more responsible for how you look than a car is. ... You're a product just as much. A product of a product of a product" (Palahniuk 77).

Baudrillard describes the successive phases of an image, starting with the "reflection of a profound reality" (*Simulacrum* 6) or a faithful copy of reality. Next in line there is an image that "masks and denatures a profound reality" or an unfaithful copy, then an image that "masks the absence of a profound reality" or a copy with no original, and, lastly, an image that "has no relation to any reality whatsoever" meaning it is "its own pure simulacrum" (*Simulacrum* 6). This last phase in which the simulacrum exists on its own, having no relation to anything but itself, is a "decisive turning point" because it "inaugurates the era of simulacra and of simulation, in which there is no longer a God to recognize his own, no longer a Last Judgment to separate the false from the true, the real from its artificial resurrection, as everything is already dead and resurrected in advance" (*Simulacrum* 6).

This world of everything plastic and forced and unnatural is the world of Baudrillard's hyperreal civilization. People are no longer able to distinguish what is or is not real because they are born into it, born into the world that is technologically so advanced it is almost impossible to know how it was before and how the world functioned without technology: "The impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real is of the same order as the impossibility of staging illusion. Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible. It is the whole political problem of parody, of hypersimulation or offensive simulation that is posed here" (Baudrillard, *Simulacrum* 15).

Moreover, context means everything, whether it is historical or cultural, inasmuch as it largely affects appearances, characters, and perceptions of others: "You're a product of our language. ...and how our laws are and how we believe our God wants us. Every bitty molecule about you has already been thought out by some million people before you. ... You're safe because you're so trapped inside your culture" (Palahniuk 78). By constantly referring to themselves as products, Shannon and Brandy are simply acknowledging the fact that no matter how many aesthetic operations they undergo and how many times they mutilate their bodies, it means very little. They were born into the world as it is and the only thing they can achieve through all these alterations is to more fully embody the simulacrum of themselves. They have realized the dream of not being who they used to be but, at the same time, they have become nobodies. They are no longer real people, if that was ever an option. Assuming so many different identities on a daily basis has made them forget their initial selves and destroyed any possibility of them being stable individuals.

As Baudrillard wrote in the late 1970s, "We are in simulation in the modern sense of the word, of which industrialization is but the final manifestation" and "the entire order of production is in the process of tumbling into operational simulation" (*Simulations* 78). What used to be a protocol in the service of practice, exercise, or education is now becoming the way of life. Everything is simulated, everything is pretended, and everyone takes it as a given. The simulacrum works because there is always someone to see it happen. As long as there are witnesses, the simulacrum is real.

The moment something was made in more than one copy, the process of duplication occurred, therefore the original was effectively turned into nothingness. For example, it is impossible to determine what "the original" is in the case of two exact copies of the same book or multiple pieces of the same dress in the same size and color: "It is the duplication of the sign which destroys its meaning. ... The multiple replicas of Marilyn's face [in Andy Warhol's pop art rendition of her image] are there to show at the same time the death of the original and the

end of representation” (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 104). In a similar way, all of these “women” in Palahniuk's novel undergoing surgery to alter their appearance to fit inside the mold of what a woman, any woman, *should* look like, according to fashion designers or movie directors, all essentially become the same woman, the woman that does not exist as such, but as a template according to which the surgery is done. Even more significantly, the template that everyone strives to become is not based on an actual existing individual; it is Baudrillard's pure simulacrum. On the other hand, where there exists an actual original, such as Marilyn Monroe once was before she became famous, “reality is immediately contaminated by its simulacrum” (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 114). What was once a reality is now forgotten because it was trampled and stomped into nothingness by all of that which is false and simulated: “We, Brandy and Alfa and me, we've been speaking English as a second language for so long that we've forgotten it as our first. I have no native tongue” (Palahniuk 8).

But Baudrillard claims that this was not always the case: “There used to be, before, a specific class of allegorical and slightly diabolical objects: mirrors, images, works of art ... - simulacra, but transparent and manifest (you didn't confuse the counterfeit with the original)” (*Simulations* 114-115), and it was clear that what one was looking at is not a reality but a depiction of reality. It was not there to confuse or deceive, but to offer a new way of perceiving reality and to think it through in another way, whereas today reality is completely enveloped and made to disappear by the simulated version of it: “Today, when the real and the imaginary are confused in the same operational totality, the aesthetic fascination is everywhere” (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 114-115).

The underlying causes may lie in McLuhan's famous statement that “the medium is the message” which means, as he explains it, that “the personal and social consequences of any medium - that is, of any extension of ourselves - result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology” (7). The medium, whatever it may be, is an extension of ourselves. It “adds itself on to what we already are” (McLuhan 11). That is why people are often blind to the fact that “the 'content' of any medium is always another medium” (McLuhan 8) and “it is only too typical that the 'content' of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium” (McLuhan 9). Shannon is one such example. Hidden away, never showing her face, never saying anything, she screams on the inside for an experience of something real, and for finding, or otherwise creating, the story about who she is, rather than *what* she is: “Give me anything in this whole fucking world that is exactly what it looks like!” (Palahniuk 95).

Unfortunately for Shannon, it may be too late. According to Baudrillard, “a kind of nonintentional parody hovers over everything, of technical simulation, of indefinable fame to

which is attached an aesthetic pleasure, that very one of reading and the rules of the game. Travelling of signs, the media, of fashion and the models, of the blind and brilliant ambiance of the simulacra” (*Simulations* 115). Everything people do, everywhere they go, they rarely, if at all, get the chance to experience reality. Advertisements with images of things where the image is manipulated and the thing itself is enhanced or reduced or made more beautiful in some way are everywhere one looks. Even the way something is made beautiful is done so this thing would turn into an embodiment of some other thing that does not even exist, but somehow it was agreed upon that this was what beautiful means. The food we eat is processed to the point of no longer being food but a mixture of chemicals and flavor enhancers only resembling the product we intended to buy. Or, in Baudrillard's words: “Reality no longer has the time to take on the appearance of reality. It no longer even surpasses fiction: it captures every dream even before it takes on the appearance of a dream” (*Simulations* 116).

Finally, Shannon finds peace at the end of the novel when she lets go of everything she used to be before blowing off her face and offers it to her brother: “I'm giving you *my* life because I don't want it anymore” (Palahniuk 103). She understands that while she cannot be Shannon McFarland, the model, anymore, Shane can. Even though it may all be over for her, the love she feels for her brother has redeemed her, and she can go on knowing she at least gave him something in the end: “This is all my identification, my birth certificate, my everything. You can be Shannon McFarland from now on. My career. The ninety-degree attention. It's yours. All of it. Everyone. I hope it's enough for you. It's everything I have left” (Palahniuk 103).

By shooting herself in the face, Shannon not only lost her identity, she also efficiently got rid of the simulacrum: the model Shannon, the perfect Shannon, the beautiful Shannon. By becoming nobody she became free. People do not look down on her anymore for being a model, they do not look at all. They may wonder for a second what is behind the veils, but only for a second. No one really wants to know, so they do not ask. On the other hand, Shane yearned his whole life for doing something incredibly ridiculous, making some mistake that would overpower the one he made, as his parents saw it, by being gay. So, Shannon made that happen for him: “Be famous. Be a big social experiment in getting what you don't want. Find value in what we've been taught is worthless. Find good in what the world says is evil. I'm giving you my life because I want the whole world to know you. I wish the whole world would embrace what it hates” (Palahniuk 103). By doing this, Shane would tear down the social and cultural standards forced upon him. He would become, not what he wanted to be, but what the world never wanted him to be, fascinating and frightening: “Sorry, mom. Sorry, God” (Palahniuk 49).

#### 4. *Survivor*

Another Palahniuk's satirical novel, *Survivor*, was published in 1999. A screenplay for a movie was in development, but the Fox network abandoned the project because of the incidents with the World Trade Center complex in Manhattan, New York, that took place on 11 September 2001, given that the novel begins with the protagonist hijacking an airplane and telling his life story into a black box. *Survivor* deals with the issue of control of bodies within a church district colony and its effects on one's individuality.

##### 4.1. Control and discipline

Tender Branson begins telling "the story of everything that went wrong" (Palahniuk 2) while sitting in the cockpit of a hijacked plane, after all of the passengers have been safely evacuated. As he narrates his life to the reader, it becomes clear he is, not unlike many of Palahniuk's characters, completely maladjusted for life in regular society. As he explains everything that happened to him, we learn how a person comes to advertising their number as a suicide hot-line and then telling people who call to kill themselves.

Tender was born and raised within a church district colony which Palahniuk named the Creedish colony.<sup>2</sup> The Creedish have a specific way of robbing each person born into the faith of their individuality and personal identity. It comes down to, but is not limited to, the names they are given:

The only names in Creedish culture were family names. The family name came from the husband. A family name was the way to claim property. The family name was a label. My family name is Branson. My rank is Tender Branson. It's the lowest rank. ... In every family, the firstborn son was named Adam, and it was Adam Branson who would inherit our land in the church district colony. All sons after Adam are named Tender. In the Branson family that makes me one of at least eight Tender Bransons my parents released to be labor missionaries. (Palahniuk 29-30)

Having the exact same name as all of his other brothers, except for the firstborn, effectively prevents him from ever developing a sense of himself as a unique, singular individual, separate

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<sup>2</sup> The Creedish are a fictional religious group, a satirical take on various traditional orthodox religions, such as the Amish.

from everyone else by that which makes him - him. The sole purpose of his existence is to do what was designated for him to do since the day he was born, or possibly even before that, as everyone's destiny is determined beforehand by the religious dogma. The same goes for the female Creedish: "All daughters, the first through last, were named Bidy. Tenders are workers who tend. Biddies do your bidding. ... In Creedish culture, your name told everybody where you belonged. Tender or Bidy. Adam or Author. Or Elder. Your name told you just how your life would go" (Palahniuk 30). Everything in Tender's life was preordained. Everything was determined. Everything was decided. One just had to live it out. Foucault describes this type of highly disciplined life in the following terms: "In discipline, the elements are interchangeable, since each is defined by the place it occupies in a series, and by the gap that separates it from the others. The unit is ... the *rank*: the place one occupies in a classification" (*Discipline* 145).

What the church elders said was the law, and no questions were to be asked: "Whatever happened in the world was a decree from God, a task to be completed. Any crying or joy just got in the way of your being useful. Any emotion was decadent. Anticipation or regret was a silly extra, a luxury" (Palahniuk 11). By instilling this sort of blind belief that everything happened because God made it happen and the elders were simply carrying out God's orders, rather than acting according to their own agendas, docile bodies were created. The docility formed people into soldiers who do what they are told and never think through or question any of these rules and decrees: "Nothing was to be known. Anything was to be expected" (Palahniuk 11).

Foucault elaborates on the concept of the docile body in his 1975 book *Discipline and Punish* where he discusses how the penal system has changed throughout history and how it affected not just life in prison, but social life as well: "By the late eighteenth century, the soldier has become something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body. Mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit" (135). Discipline took precedence over torture and punishment because it created individuals who easily complied with the rules. They never needed to be punished because they never transgressed, and they never transgressed because they were under constant observation, which is derived from Bentham's idea of a prison called *panopticon*. As Foucault writes:

This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the center and

periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead – all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism. (*Discipline* 197)

With time, Tender realizes that all the things he and the other children were taught in the church district did not serve the purpose of building and expanding their intelligence and knowledge. It was quite the contrary: “We thought all this teaching was to make us smart. What it did was make us stupid. With all the little facts we learned, we never had time to think” (Palahniuk 58). The church elders worked hard on repressing any form of critical thought or creativity. The children are taught from a young age what to think, but not how to think, because thinking for oneself can be a dangerous thing for the effective functioning of a system that is based on discipline and control. If the discipline fails, the system fails: “It was church doctrine that the rest of your life would be the same work. The same being alone. Nothing would change. Every day. This was success. Here was the prize” (Palahniuk 59). Tender and the other Creedish were taught from the first day that they possessed no goodness to begin with, so they would have to spend their whole lives paying for that fact: “According to everything we grew up believing, we’re corrupt and evil and unclean” (Palahniuk 63).

The geographical terms of Creedish life, the life closed into itself and avoidant of outside influence, is another characteristic of the church district colony which benefits the system: “Discipline sometimes requires *enclosure*, the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself. It is the protected place of disciplinary monotony” (Foucault, *Discipline* 141). What is achieved by this is that the members of the colony are prevented from experiencing something different than what they are accustomed to. It stops them from realizing another way of life, of communication and companionship. They only ever know the discipline and teachings they receive from the church elders. The whereabouts and the actions of each individual are perpetually known to the system, so the individual would be promptly corrected or set right if necessary:

One must eliminate the effects of imprecise distributions, the uncontrolled disappearance of individuals, their diffuse circulation, their unusable and dangerous coagulation; it was a tactic of anti-desertion, anti-vagabondage, anti-concentration. Its aim was to establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals, to set up useful communications, to interrupt others, to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct

of each individual, to assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities or merits. (Foucault, *Discipline* 143)

Similarly to this, the lives of the Creedish are under complete control of their community. At the age of seventeen, all the children are sent out into the world to find work, except for the oldest son in each family and the biddy that was chosen for him to marry. Those who go into the world are employed where the church elders station them: “These kids would be placed when they turned seventeen by Creedish overseers in the outside world who found them jobs as manual labor or domestic help on a cash-pay basis. Temp jobs that could last for years” (Palahniuk 72). They would have to send the money to the church elders and essentially become slaves for the district. They would never be allowed to find a husband or wife, have children, or do anything other than fulfil the orders they are given: “According to church doctrine, the most noble you could be was to just do your work and hope to live long enough to show the district an enormous profit” (Palahniuk 73). It is never about them, it is always about the church. And, at a certain point, each of them would have to end their life: “One day the wickedness of the kings of the world would destroy us, oh sorrow, and armies of the world would march upon us, wailing, and the purest children of God would have to deliver themselves unto the Lord by their own hand. The Deliverance” (Palahniuk 71). This specific aspect of the church doctrine never seemed very appealing to Tender, so he decides to opt for the loophole: “It's church doctrine that says I have to kill myself. They don't say it has to be a hurry-hurry instant quick death” (Palahniuk 71).

From the way Tender describes the world he is now a part of and the job he does cleaning houses, it becomes clear that, even though he did not feel unhappy or tormented after growing up in the church district, he does not have the need to fully comply with all that was expected of him. There is a sort of resentment within him stemming from being robbed of having his own name and his own thoughts: “Pretty soon, we'll all have the same thoughts at the same time. We'll be in perfect unison. Synchronized. United. Equal. Exact. The way ants are. Insectile. Sheep” (Palahniuk 110).

All the while he was in the outside world, Tender kept hearing news about the other Creedish, who were labor missionaries like him, committing suicides. Some years ago, there was a mass suicide in the church district, and the remaining survivors were following suit. This was expected as they were meant to take their own lives according to the church doctrine. However, at a certain point, these news started to sound rather suspicious: “The majority are just normal run-of-the-mill everyday garden-variety suicides ... but in between are a few strange cases. In one case, a right-handed man shot himself with his left hand. In another case, a woman hung

herself with a bathrobe tie, but one of her arms was dislocated and both her wrists were bruised” (Palahniuk 40). It soon becomes very clear that someone is murdering the Creedish and arranging it to seem like suicides. Tender soon realizes who the person responsible for all of these deaths is. His believed-to-be-dead brother Adam seems to still be alive, surviving the demolition of the church district, and on a rampage: “I have an older brother who might still be alive, and it's easy to picture Adam Branson out murdering survivors in ways the police would think was suicide” (Palahniuk 126).

#### **4.2. Sex as Sin and Transgression**

After having reestablished the connection with his three-minute older brother, Tender comes to a great number of revelations. First of all, Tender learns that all this time there was someone out there, a member of the Creedish church, who completely and utterly disagreed with the church doctrine and actually went out of his way to wipe it out: “I destroyed them. ... The entire district colony” (Palahniuk 153). What this means is there was one survivor of the Creedish death cult, as the newspapers called it, who was somehow able to tear down the chains of blind faith and produce a free, unencumbered thought. He also learns that his memories of the district are completely false. He believed that “people lived simple, fulfilling lives. We were a steadfast and proud people. Our air and water were clean. Our days were useful. Our nights were absolute” (Palahniuk 151). Adam tells him how stupid he is and begins explaining to Tender that “the Creedish elders were a pack of racist, sexist white slavers” (Palahniuk 153).

Through all the teachings and embarrassing examinations and rituals they had to go through, the Creedish labor missionaries left the district brainwashed and cheated: “Everything that you remember is wrong. ... You remember a lie. ... You were bred and trained and sold” (Palahniuk 153-154). The prescript of having to kill themselves at a certain point is simply “the ultimate act of a slave” (Palahniuk 154), and that is why the Creedish elders taught it to their children. It was a way to make sure they would never abandon the dogma, never become something other than Creedish work force. That is how each minute of their lives would be fully succumbed to and controlled by the Creedish church.

The greatest revelation Tender arrives to is when Adam tells him this: “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 church doctrine” (Palahniuk 154). Tender believes he has already done this by saying bad words, working on

Sundays, shoplifting, and, most importantly, denouncing the church, but Adam explains what he means more clearly: “You’re still a virgin” (Palahniuk 154).

In the newly published fourth volume of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, which was done in disregard to his wishes not to have any of his work published posthumously, Foucault writes about virginity or “definitive continence” as a practice that appeared in the second century and became widespread among Christians. This tendency to forbid all sexual intercourse to any Christian as an indispensable condition for their salvation was, with varying intensities and in different forms, constantly present in the first Christian centuries. The valorization of virginity has gradually brought about the definition of the relation the individual had to himself, to his thoughts, to his soul, and to his body (Foucault 182-184).

Similarly to Foucault’s historical overview of the Christian rules on sexuality, Adam explains how most cultures make you a slave by taking away sexual pleasure:

Some cultures make it so you don't enjoy sex so much. They cut off parts. Parts of the clitoris. ... Or the foreskin. Then the sensitive parts of you, the parts that you'd enjoy the most, you feel less and less with those parts. ... The cultures that don't castrate you to make you a slave, they castrate your mind. They make sex so filthy and evil and dangerous that no matter how good you know it would feel to have sexual relations, you won't. (Palahniuk 155-156)

According to Foucault, the virgin's renunciation was more complete than the others, because it meant putting all the desires of the flesh to death. By preserving this purity intact throughout one’s life, the virgin lives an incorruptible life (*Histoire* 189-190). But living a pure and uncontaminated life was not the underlying motive of the Creedish elders: “And if you never have sex ... you never gain a sense of power. You never gain a voice or an identity of your own. Sex is the act that separates us from our parents. Children from adults. It's by having sex that adolescents first rebel” (Palahniuk 156). For the first time in one of his novels, Palahniuk uses sexual experience as a necessary prerequisite for establishing one’s identity. There have been sexual references and sexual experiences in his two previous novels, but in this one, sex is the one thing that is crucial for an individual to experience in order to gain a sense of self.

From this, the reader becomes aware that the difference between the religious concept of purity and restraint from sex and the one employed by the Creedish is a testament to the difference between religion and cultism. Religion seeks chastity, togetherness, and helpfulness. Cults are established to create controlled, malleable, useful, and blind slaves. Adam explains that

he left the colony because of what he found out. He learned what the church elders did to young tenders and biddies. After being asked: “Do you remember what they did to you?” (Palahniuk 156), it all starts coming back to Tender. He cries and refuses to admit the truth:

They made you watch. ... The elders made you watch every time anyone in the church district had a child. ... They made childbirth as painful as they could. ... So of course you'd never want sex. You'd never want sex because every time our mother had another child ... they made you sit there and watch. Because sex to you is just pain and sin and your mother stretched out there screaming. (Palahniuk 158)

Control of bodies is in actuality control of the mind which results in docility and obedience. As the Creedish children were traumatized for life, they at the same time suppressed these memories so as not to be tortured by them. This was fairly convenient for the enslavers given that their subjects not only never transgressed, but were also never able to clearly explain why they never transgressed, apart from claiming that it was a part of their faith, or that it was a sin. This horrible thing that they were forced to witness as children followed them wherever they went, and their chastity was guaranteed. Who they became was fully determined by the church and that is how “discipline makes the individual” because the whole point was that “the legal apparatus was not to escape this scarcely secret invasion” (Foucault, *Discipline* 170). And that is what was done to them. Their minds were invaded. They were controlled from the inside. It was no wonder that the Creedish had no issue with having to commit suicide. That is what most of them would probably have done anyway, even if it had not been part of the doctrine.

This is precisely why Adam wants Tender to experience sex. Adam wants for his brother to escape the evil shackles of the cult they grew up in and become free in any way that he can: “Adam killed off the surviving Creedish because he knew that an old culture of slaves couldn’t found a new culture of free men. ... Adam wanted me to survive, but not my slave mind set” (Palahniuk 163). As Foucault writes in his “Preface to Transgression”, sexuality never did “enjoy a more immediately natural understanding and never did it know a greater ‘felicity of expression’ than in the Christian world of fallen bodies and of sin” (29). Those who transgress against what they were taught not to do are the first who experience a new and different kind of freedom, and usually the ones who experience it more strongly and more fully than those who grew up outside of such faiths.

According to Foucault, “sexuality is a fissure - not one which surrounds us as the basis of our isolation or individuality, but one which marks the limit within us and designates us as a limit”

(“Preface” 30). Crossing this limit makes for the difference between children and adults, the mind and the flesh, the chaste and the impure. It creates a division among people but also within a person. Who one was before and who one is after the first sexual experience are made painfully separate by all the religious and cultural beliefs that were established at some point and that continue to affect how the human race perceives sexuality. When one remains chaste, one is equal to the angels of God (Foucault, *Histoire* 190), but if one “soils” oneself, they become something other than angel. They become human. It is because “the language of sexuality has lifted us into the night where God is absent, and where all of our actions are addressed to this absence in a profanation which at once identifies it, dissipates it, exhausts itself in it, and restores it to the empty purity of its transgression” (Foucault, “Preface” 31). So, both Foucault and Palahniuk suggest that being forever chaste like a second-century Christian or forever docile like an obedient soldier makes it impossible to be individual, to have an identity other than the one of belonging to a group, the identity provided by the church, or the state, or a unit. It makes it impossible to find within oneself that special something that goes along with our name and our face.

Tender decides to find his own individuality and do something to change his fate: “Every last minute of my life has been preordained, and I’m sick and tired of it ... Behaving myself was just not going to work anymore. It was time to make trouble” (Palahniuk 75-78). Doing all the things that he was never meant to do is what gave him room to become something other than Creedish death cult survivor. It gave him a chance to explore other parts of himself, parts that were meant to be repressed forever. He realizes the faultiness in the teachings of the church: “What they teach you in the church district colony is to deserve nothing. Keep a mild and downcast countenance. Preserve a modest posture and demeanor. Speak in a simple and quiet tone. And just look how well their philosophy has turned out. Them dead. Me alive” (Palahniuk 77).

Foucault equates the transgression of sexual experience with the death of God or, rather, with the notion of losing one’s faith: “The death of God does not restore us to a limited and positivistic world, but to a world exposed by the experience of its limits, made and unmade by that excess which transgresses it” (Preface 32). Once that which is forbidden has been experienced it is no longer a mystery and the world itself seems bare and uncovered. The death of God here means the complete collapse of blind confidence in the system one is part of. Once the faith in the system is lost, the resistance begins. Once the individual opens his eyes to the fact that the system cannot and never has provided security and truth, there are few options that remain. One option is to try and escape the system, another is to attempt to destroy it from within. Thus, Palahniuk’s novel(s) – in line with Foucault’s philosophy – suggests that

transgression is necessary for the outreach toward freedom: “Transgression carries the limit right to the limit of its being; transgression forces the limit to face the fact of its imminent disappearance, to find itself in what it excludes” (Foucault, “Preface” 34).

## Conclusion

All three of Palahniuk's protagonists, "not-Tyler", Shannon, and Tender, look for redemption. They desperately need to be saved from the feeling that the world blames them, not that much for being who they are, but for becoming who they wish to be. They need to know that what they strive to become is okay and there is nothing to feel guilty for. The reason for these feelings can only be explained by looking into their circumstances, the culture they belong to, the time they were born in, and the context of their upbringing. More specifically, they were brought up to believe that wanting something other than what one's parents, or custodians, or church elders decreed is wrong. Everything they want seems to be either a mistake, a waste, or a sin.

Luckily, they all have people in their lives who work hard to prove to them that what they were taught is right is not the only option. Through the love that they receive, in the case of the narrator of *Fight Club*, or the love that they selflessly give, in spite of never having been recipients of it, in Shannon's and Tender's case, they find their freedom in having their individuality accepted without the need for corrections. In the end, they all somehow manage to find a way to achieve what they yearned for.

The narrator of *Fight Club*, failing to stop Tyler from demolishing the city and causing an abundance of pain, pulls the trigger on himself, thus punishing himself for what he was not able to prevent. At that moment he begins to realize that Tyler was wrong all along: "We are not special. We are not crap or trash, either. We just are" (Palahniuk 2007). And that is when he becomes free in simply being who he is. He finally realizes that it is not the material possessions you do or do not own that define you. You can be who you are with or without those things. It is not what is happening in the world that defines you, because you can change it, but you do not have to destroy it. It is what you choose to do with who you are, which is what Marla helps him with. After having learned everything about him, she did not leave, and that is what provided him with enough space to work on finding his own self and stop relying on a made up, supposed-to-be better version.

Shannon finds redemption in letting go of all the hate and dissatisfaction she felt towards her family, the other people traveling with her and, ultimately, herself. She becomes free of the shackles of being a simulation of a person, not only with the help of the shotgun, but through providing her brother with everything he needed all his life. She did not only give him her identity to allow him to experience the world of glamour as a fashion model, she gives him her love and acceptance. Through finally being a sister to Shane, rather than envious of him, she

finds herself and her purpose: “Completely and totally, permanently and without hope, forever and ever I love Brandy Alexander. And that's enough” (Palahniuk 105).

Tender Branson finds his freedom and a blank canvas to create a new story of himself after all of the other Creedish are dead. His brother Adam destroys the entire colony, and Tender kills his brother: “Adam wanted to die because he knew the way he'd been trained, he could never be anything but a Creedish” (Palahniuk 163). Being the only one left, it dawns on him that he no longer needs to define himself as a Creedish, because there is no more colony, not one single member. The whole point of hijacking a plane, which did not result in anyone's death, is for him to tell his story into the black box. By telling his story he would realize that is exactly what it is, just a story: “Here's the life and death of Tender Branson, and I can just walk away from it” (Palahniuk 176).

To conclude, it seems that Palahniuk's novels suggest that sometimes, walking away from what one so desperately clings to is the only path toward not only finding one's identity but also learning to accept oneself for who one really is. It is not only outward acceptance that plays a role in the formation of one's identity, it is also being able to come to terms with it on one's own. And after that happens, the story can unfold anyway one wants it to.

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